CRITICAL INSIGHTS

The Bell Jar

by Sylvia Plath

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Salem Press
Pasadena, California Hackensack, New Jersey

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The bell jar, by Sylvia Plath / editor, Janet McCann.
p. cm. — (Critical insights)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-58765-836-5 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58765-821-1 (Critical insights : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58765-833-4 (set-pack : alk. paper)
1. Plath, Sylvia. Bell jar. I. McCann, Janet.
PS3566.L27B4325 2012
813'.54—dc23

2011022414

PRINTED IN CANADA

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About This Volume

Janet McCann

The Bell Jar is a highly distinctive and unusual book, and although the era of the 1950s, which it represents, has faded and disappeared into history, the power of this novel does not dissipate. *The Bell Jar* has always been troubling reading because its main character, Esther Greenwood, is so fully identified with Sylvia Plath herself. Attempts to separate the two critically have not been successful, and the book often ends up classified along with those that readers find somewhere between autobiography and fiction, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Augusten Burroughs's *Running with Scissors*. But however it is labeled, *The Bell Jar* gets inside the mind of a brilliant young woman who cannot accept the constraints placed on her by her time. Whether or not we superimpose Plath's own ending on the optimistic ending of the novel, the interior landscape she describes remains startling, precise, and unforgettable—as does the world outside her.

When *The Bell Jar* first came out, it was thought of, and spoken of, as a woman's version of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. For many current-day readers, it has superseded *Catcher* in importance because the surrounding society is represented more superficially in *Catcher*. For some young women today, this novel *is* the 1950s. Not all of the television shows and movies that have attempted to recapture that time, images such as those in *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*, can catch the feel of the 1950s as Plath does. It is unusual for a writer to be so aware of the trivia of her time as she was. It is as if she had a sense of her own era as though it were history—and, indeed, there was a lapse of years between the events described and the narration. But Plath's persistent tendency to distance herself from her own life, while it may have been psychologically unhealthy, had artistic benefits.

This volume collects essays about *The Bell Jar*, both older ones and new ones. In choosing the previously published essays to be reprinted

here, I have tried to represent a smorgasbord of perspectives and also to show how the novel has been viewed over time, from its first publication in 1963 until the second decade of the new millennium. The changes in perspective are further indication of this book's long-lived appeal—it fits into whatever theoretical framework is current, from 1970s feminist activism to some postmodern approaches. However, I have also selected the essays based on consideration of their general readability. I have excluded pieces requiring readers to have knowledge of specialized vocabularies, even though many such essays may be highly insightful; instead, I have attempted to choose essays that college students and their instructors can share and that might also be helpful to those reading *The Bell Jar* on their own. A quick browse of the Internet shows how many groups of Plath followers of all kinds are eager for any new take on her and her work. *The Bell Jar* itself has the virtue of being perfectly clear, at least superficially, but it opens all kinds of questions. It has strong appeal for scholars of the 1950s, feminists, psychology buffs, older women who experienced the time the novel describes, persons undergoing psychological turmoil, bildungsroman addicts, poets, and uncountable other groups and individuals. The essays reprinted in this volume provide some of the finest scholarship on *The Bell Jar* that has been made available over the years and offer a wide variety of critical approaches to this work.

All of the essays in this volume, new and reprinted, have some common directions: they are focused on how the time period of the 1950s affected Plath and hence her fictional counterpart, Esther Greenwood; they are also focused on Esther's internal struggles and how they are dealt with by Esther and by others. Some of the reprinted essays locate Esther in her time—in Cold War rhetoric, in the world of *Mademoiselle* magazine and its expectations, in the intrusive images of domesticity that could not be evaded. They explore the novel in terms of body criticism and sexual ambivalence. They also examine every element of mental health, treatments, and fads or customs in attitudes toward mental illness. They do not so much dissect Esther Greenwood as

underscore the forces tearing at her against which he was trying to hold firm.

All of the essays written specifically for this volume are by women who are poets as well as scholars; they look at this work through a different lens. Each of the new essays takes a specific angle from which to examine *The Bell Jar*. My own introductory essay gives an overview of the issue of "nature versus nurture" in Esther's developing unease and depression. I argue that the 1950s play an immense role in bringing about the breakdown that Esther experiences, and that the combination of her inability to compromise and an ethos unfriendly to female genius make her collapse inevitable.

Jane Satterfield's biographical sketch of Plath describes the formative events in the life of the creator of *The Bell Jar* and traces some of the major themes that obsessed her, not only in the novel but also in her poems. This essay provides solid background information on Plath's life and subjects and gives insight into the character of the novelist. It serves as a strong introduction to this work. Emma Straub's "*Paris Review* Perspective" provides some persuasive reasons why *The Bell Jar* has continued to have a strong appeal to later generations, and why the work never seems to become outdated.

Allison Wilkins, in "'The domesticated wilderness': Patriarchal Oppression in *The Bell Jar*," analyzes the book from the point of view of ecofeminism; she uses current ecological criticism to provide a rich and well-documented analysis of Plath's representation of Esther's—and her own—essentialist perspective. Wilkins demonstrates that Esther Greenwood needs contact with nature, needs to be part of a self-sustaining and healthy ecosystem that is planetary as well as personal. She traces Esther's attempts to maintain contact with the natural world and her forced compliance with the demands of a nature-denying patriarchal system.

In "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Understanding Cultural and Historical Context in an Iconic Text," Iris Jamahl Dunkle discusses how the novel reflects the time in which it was written and remains relevant to a

woman's world despite the decades that have elapsed since it first saw print. This insightful analysis focuses on the demands and expectations of Plath's era and how they frustrated and tormented the young writer and concludes with the significance of the novel to today's different readership.

Kim Bridgford's essay, "Interruptions in a Patriarchal World: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*," addresses the noteworthy similarities and differences between these two accounts of a young woman's mental breakdown and recovery, separated by thirty years in the writing but only fifteen years in the events described. Bridgford shows how each woman is torn apart by her circumstances but then healed, coincidentally, by the same doctor in the same institution.

Ellen McGrath Smith's essay, "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Critical Reception," focuses on the critics who over the years have responded to this text. Smith connects elements of critical thought and ideology with specific critics and critical perspectives that have dominated in the decades since the book was published. She introduces the main Plath critics and their assumptions, and shows how each fits into the thought structures of his or her time. Smith's essay gives a sense of *The Bell Jar*'s impact on the American literary scene and provides an essential resource for students writing critical essays on the novel.

In "Sentient Patterning in *The Bell Jar*," Pamela St. Clair examines how Plath defined her creative life by looking at Plath's writing process, her reading, her inspirations, and her thoughts about the writing life. This essay looks at the novel as an analysis of what writing is and how Plath, through Esther, represents what doing creative work entails, how incredibly difficult it can be to do creative work, what "writer's block" did to her, and how she represented its operations in her novel. This unusual new approach looks at the book as an index of Plath's development as a writer and relates her predicament to writers in general.

Together, the new essays in this volume show how Sylvia Plath as a

person and as a writer continues to get into our heads in the new century, and how the novel that was originally hailed as the female counterpart to *The Catcher in the Rye* continues to hold its place among recent and current representations of adolescent upheaval and anxiety. *The Bell Jar* becomes something new for each generation that engages with it. The essays reprinted here show the major insights that have come over the years since the book first took its place on the shelf of American literature and give examples of some very different critical frameworks. The new essays also demonstrate the ongoing importance of this novel to poets. *The Bell Jar* is the novel of a poet coming into her own, after all, and of all the obstacles and hardships she encounters in her attempts simply to be herself, to speak as herself.

THE BOOK AND AUTHOR

On *The Bell Jar*

Janet McCann

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, first published in England under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in January of 1963, was received with warily positive reviews. The book was officially available on January 14; some reviewers had it earlier. But on February 11 of that year, Plath committed suicide. One wonders how many of the reviews she read. Plath always waited impatiently for any public response to her work, and when commentary on her poetry books finally arrived she was often disappointed at its sparseness. Her husband, Ted Hughes, destroyed her last journals, so we know little about how much she knew of her novel's reception. Some critics have suggested that the first reviews were negative and that this fact contributed to her despair, but this was not so. About ten reviews were published before Plath's death, although we can only guess at how many of these were available to her, given her isolated situation and the lack of instantly accessible media at the time.

An unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, to which she would likely have had access, commented:

> Miss Lucas can certainly write and the book is convincing. It reads so much like the truth that it is hard to dissociate her from Esther Greenwood, the "I" of the story, but she has the gift of being able to feel and yet to watch herself: she can feel the desolation and yet relate it to the landscape of everyday life. There is a dry wit behind the poetic flashes and the zany fiascoes of her relationships, and when the last part of the book begins to trail a little and details seem both ugly and irrelevant, one finds oneself thinking "but this is how it happened." Miss Lucas is exploring as she writes, and if she can learn to shape as well as she imagines, she may write an extremely good book. *The Bell Jar* is already a considerable achievement.

Another early response was Laurence Lerner's:

> Slowly, then more quickly, we realize that Esther's ruthless and innocent wit is not just a result of youth and intelligence. It is the sign of a detachment, a lack of involvement, so complete that it leads to neurosis. From satirist she becomes a patient, yet so imperceptibly that after realizing she is sick we don't feel at all tempted to discount her previous shrewdness, or even cease to find her funny, in a frightening way. There are criticisms of American society that the neurotic can make as well as anyone, perhaps better, and Miss Lucas makes them triumphantly.

The first reviewers recognized Plath's work as something startlingly new and perhaps intrusive; anxiety was mingled with their admiration, and they fully identified protagonist with writer explicitly, even though no one knew who she was.

Indeed, from the beginning, reception of the novel focused on mental illness—on the issue of "neurosis," a term that tended to be used generally to mean "mentally ill, but not seriously mentally ill." First discussions of the novel in classrooms often focused on this issue: Is *The Bell Jar* in fact a case study, simply observed by the case? Many thought that it was. Or was it simply the 1950s that were to blame? Already those of us in graduate school in the 1960s had a kind of perspective on the time—things were changing, we believed; women's lives were going to be different. A glance through the Plath literature since then shows that, despite all the other issues explored—feminism, 1950s rhetoric, body criticism, freedom and constraint, and so forth—the question remains potent: Are Esther's problems—and Plath's—mostly in the mind or in the world? And what does the answer to this question mean in terms of the novel and the issues it raises? The question remains vital almost fifty years after Plath's death, with some critics still dismissing the novel as self-indulgent exploitation and others seeing the author as an important early feminist.

Esther's story is of course Sylvia Plath's, with some fictionalization; the frame story of Esther Greenwood's breakdown is based on Plath's experiences from the time she won an internship with the mag-

azine *Mademoiselle* after her junior year in college through her breakdown and suicide attempt, until her dismissal from the mental hospital as cured. Pieces of her earlier life are woven in where needed. We can for the purposes of some discussions think of Esther as Plath's self-representation, which is not the same as equating the two.

From the beginning of the novel Esther's self-image is out of kilter. We have no way of knowing whether she was once whole and was shattered by the New York experience, or if this is a fragmentation from early childhood—she gives hints of both— but the New York experience is the last straw. Esther's fragmentation is presented through images: she sees herself as an absence rather than a presence in critical situations, fails to recognize her own image, and sees others as body parts, especially mouths, instead of people. By the time she throws her clothes, her possible selves, out the hotel window at the end of the ninth chapter, it is clear that her fragmentation can no longer be mended by ordinary means. But is this dissociation at least partly explained by her circumstances?

The world of the 1950s was not promising to eccentrically creative young women. At the very beginning of Plath's journals, as she described her first days at Smith College and her experiences as she became used to the studies and social whirl there, she wrote about the issues central to *The Bell Jar*. Of society's expectations for her, she wrote:

> After a while I suppose I'll get used to the idea of marriage and children. If only it doesn't swallow up my desires to express myself in a smug sensuous haze. Sure, marriage is self-expression, but only if my art my writing isn't just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married. If only I could find him . . . the man who will be intelligent yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn't I expect it in a man? (*Journals* 21)

Plath saw marriage and children as a trap, and sexual inequality as basic to society. It seemed that only true equality would offer an out. And

sadly, the young writer made her own self-expression dependent on finding a certain kind of man.

As a college student, she had not fully defined the sense of injustice that paralyzed her when she looked at male-female relationships. However, she felt it. She was pulled and repelled by the image that was being sold. She wrote:

> So I sit here, smiling as I think in my fragmentary way: "Woman is but an engine of ecstasy, a mimic of the earth from the ends of her curled hair to her red lacquered nails." Then I think, remembering the family of beautiful children that lie asleep upstairs [she was babysitting for a family that summer], "Isn't it better to give in to the pleasant cycles of reproduction, the easy, comforting presence of a man around the house?" I remember Liz, her face white, delicate as an ash on the wind; her red lips staining the cigarette; her full breasts. . . . She said to me, "But think how happy you can make a man someday." Yes, I'm thinking, and so far it's all right. But then I do a flipover and reach out in my mind to E., seeing a baseball game, maybe, perhaps watching television, or roaring with careless laughter at some dirty joke with the boys, beer cans lying about green and shiny gold, and ash trays. I spiral back to me, sitting here, swimming, drowning, sick with longing. I have too much conscience injected in me to break customs without disasterous effects; I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled. The whole thing sickens me. (*Journals* 20)

The situation quite literally made her ill.

She was then about eighteen. From this time on there appears in her journals the basic conflict—to do or to be; to achieve or to give birth and be subject to the will of others. There is nothing psychotic about any of this, and most women who lived through the 1950s who were at all questioning and resistant felt the same way, though certainly not all thought that the basic inequality was rooted in attitudes toward virgin-

ity and that once freed from this—the virginity itself and her own attitude toward it—a woman could be free. But this kind of thinking, this reduction of a whole complex of issues and attitudes to a single symbolic act, was typical of Plath.

Many of Plath's journal entries could have been written by Esther; they elucidate Esther's fears and concerns as well as Plath's. In fact, few books show so completely the mingling of internal and external constraints that can cause individual disaster. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* shows it to some extent, but in that novel the causative factors are less specific. It does make a great difference that Plath's subject is a woman's life, the trials of a woman who cannot accept or reject her prescribed role. The fiction that comes closest may be Henrik Ibsen's 1890 play *Hedda Gabler.* No one conflates the character Hedda Gabler and Ibsen, and the issue of mental illness rarely arises in the drama, but here too the main character is stifled by the life society expects her to lead.

In both narratives, the main character gives specific images of her constraint, such as Hedda's honeymoon train ride versus her previous free horseback riding. Esther too considers riding in various vehicles as a measure of control and freedom:

> Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.
>
> Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. (*Bell Jar* 3)

In each of these works the main character finds the power to create and to destroy associated solely with the masculine and yet unbearably desirable. In each there is a character—a "double" for the protagonist—who has in fact thrown aside the demands of conventionality to follow

her own goals (Thea Elvsted in *Hedda Gabler* and Doreen in *The Bell Jar*), but the main character is too imprisoned by her social role to be like that herself; she cannot bear to be an outcast. Moreover, for both protagonists, pregnancy and birth represent more complete imprisonment. And, to state the obvious, in both stories the struggle to be free of the bondage leads to self-destructive acts.

Only in *The Bell Jar*, however, are society's restrictions and expectations so specifically and clearly laid out—the implicit and explicit demands on women, the influences that are pervasive and invisible, in newspapers and magazines, in advertisements, in the classes that are taught and the ways they are taught, in the career choices offered to women, in the university majors and the factors that lead to a college education at all (in a time when this is not necessarily an expectation). Those of us who experienced this era are shocked by recognition. Those who did not sometimes cannot believe that women's life choices could have been so limited and want to point out options for Esther—they say she could be a doctor like her cousin Teresa or Dr. Nolan; she could learn languages and become an editor like Jay Cee, her temporary boss in New York. But in the context of her world, Esther cannot do these things.

In the 1950s, the world of the middle-class woman, which seemed to have all sorts of promise in the aftermath of World War II, was actually very limited. Plath's novel gives a good survey of the popular roles assigned to women. "Wreath of Women," Muriel Rukeyser's poem of the 1940s, was often quoted for its telling lines:

> Women in drudgery knew
> They must be one of four:
> Whores, artists, saints, and wives.

It would be entertaining to sort Plath's characters from *The Bell Jar* into these roles. Esther seems to find out the limitations during her New York trip and to realize that the available roles for her are mostly

mutually exclusive categories. And this realization nearly destroys her.

One of the most insightful early analyses of *The Bell Jar* examines the work as a bildungsroman; this study by Linda W. Wagner (later Wagner-Martin), perhaps the most important Plath scholar, is a landmark. But the book is really an "unbildungsroman," tracing Esther's change from apparent knowledge and self-confidence to ignorance and uncertainty as the apparently open horizon shrinks to a point. Esther is a young woman who has always done well within her small circle—she is academically outstanding, personally and socially successful. In New York she learns that what she believes to be her best attributes are not worth much on the current exchange and that the stratagems she has used to survive and to overcome limitations placed on her will not serve her in the world. Her trip to the city from the suburbs, central to the bildungsroman, does not cause her to develop new abilities and diminish old flaws. Rather, one skill after another fails her, and finally her self-image and direction are dissolved in doubt and fear. The story shows the unraveling of the persona, the picking away at all the elements of selfhood the young protagonist had acquired until there is nothing left but raw sentience. The created persona, product of her time, had a self-definition. She had achieved academically, knew how to dress and act in company, was popular with men, thought of herself as worldly-wise, and was looking forward to a bright future in which she would put her learned skills into practice and find her niche in the world. And this achievement was what seemed to have been promised her, but the middle-class rainbow turns out to be an illusion.

After her breakdown and her treatment, she seems to accept the world that is offered. This is the *Bildung*, or really rebuilding; of course, the novel ends with Esther's hopeful reentry into society. The restoration, however, is not as closely drawn or as convincing as the breakdown. We feel at the end that Esther has learned how to pass in society and has not really reentered society as one who has changed to fit into it. But would her true transformation be a happy ending? And in any case could it even be possible—that pills or shock treatments or

counseling could change the essential person enough to re-form her into a typical 1950s wife and mother? And again, does this not bring the flaw back to the society that would shape Esther?

Several writers have commented that the first half of the book describes her breakdown and the second half, her restoration. But this is not exact, and the imbalance between the two parts is telling. The first part ends with Esther's suicide attempt and consists of thirteen chapters out of twenty—138 of 200 pages in the paperback edition of 1972. Part 1 begins in New York and ends with the speaker's loss of consciousness after taking drugs and hiding away: it is her exit from the constraining world. Her exit from the world as she takes sleeping pills "one by one by one" is a powerful climax: "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep" (189). The second part ends with her reentry, appropriately ritualized by the meeting with doctors at which her cure is certified; this reentry is shocking, perhaps a birth image but not a fully positive one: "The eyes and faces all turned toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (273). For her exit she is herself; for the reentry she has learned to be someone else.

The lack of a "fit" between self and world is evident from the very opening. "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I did not know what I was doing in New York," the novel begins. Esther should be at the high point of her young life—her success at schoolwork and writing has provided her a trip away from her suburban home to the big city, as is the bildungsroman tradition, and now she is to be tested in surroundings more complicated and difficult than her hometown—she will be an apprentice to an editor at a major magazine. The Rosenbergs and New York are closely associated—the news is visible wherever she looks, and it troubles her greatly; her own uncomfortable situation is made more painful by it. She is discovering that her small countable achievements are worth little in the wider world, and that she does not know how to make the leap

from her controlled life to this uncontrollable one. Her college is not New York. Major transformation will be necessary for her to fit the new circumstances, and she does not know how to transform.

When she realizes that she is not an instant success in the city, she looks wildly around for options, and she finds a handful of women whose lives she could imitate—if it were bearable, if she could. These are the women of the 1950s, and they represent to her the available roles. They range from Doreen, the outlaw, to Betsy, the cheerful, enthusiastic conformist. Other options present themselves through her boss, Jay Cee, successful editor in New York; Hilda, the bigot; her own mother, the compromiser; Dodo Conway, the Catholic with a house full of kids; and a whole host of others. No model fits.

The Bell Jar in fact presents a challenging analysis of the barriers that stood between young women and achievement in the 1950s. In Sylvia/Esther's case the factors were exaggerated and intense, but they were the same problems faced by other middle-class women who did not want what the women's magazines and their own mothers were selling. Many women felt a paralysis similar to that of Esther Greenwood and of Plath herself when it came to the drive to push forward with ambition in one field or another. The pressure to conform was always present, and women putting themselves forward in one area or another were constantly being rebuffed and challenged by images of what they would miss.

Emphasis on fashion of course is a constant in all eras, but the styles of the 1950s contained a number of secondary messages about the roles of women in the home and in society. *Mademoiselle*, where the young Sylvia Plath served the apprenticeship she describes in *The Bell Jar* (ironically renaming the magazine *Ladies' Day*), produced unsubtle propaganda steering women into designed lives. In a perceptive essay (reprinted in this volume), Garry M. Leonard quotes passages from *Mademoiselle* issues of 1953 that helped to define a young woman's destiny as object of seduction and not as achiever. For example: "Plane curves are for the math books. For *captivating* curves, try Hidden Trea-

sure—the only bra designed to add perfection to the A-minus, B-minus, or C-minus cup. Instantly transforms a blue belle into a 'dish fit for the gods!'" (60). Plane curves are for math books—not for women; bras are for women, and help them serve themselves up for male consumption. Grades to women are for desirability, not achievements—perfection of cup rather than proof. The focus of Leonard's essay is on the mixed feelings that Plath, and her creation Esther, shows toward these popular images. Esther sometimes rejects commodified femininity but yet often accepts it—as witnessed by her almost iconlike treatment of the makeup case she receives as a trip freebie. It gives another dimension to our picture of Plath to read the polished, superficial prose she wrote as an intern for *Mademoiselle*.

In the 1950s, the vast majority of middle-class American women stayed home and raised their children. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: "In 1950 about one in three women participated in the labor force. By 1998, nearly three of every five women of working age were in the labor force." However, this statistic for 1950 includes all women and women of every class, including those who had to work to survive. By 2010, some 70 percent of American families had both adults in the workplace; the pattern in the 1950s was far different. Because of her lack of a father, Plath may not have felt the slights that many children of working mothers were subjected to in the 1950s—stay-at-home mothers generally felt that working mothers were not carrying their part of the neighborhood responsibilities and did not hesitate to say so; they thought it greedy and unnatural for an ordinary woman to have an ordinary job. Indulgences were granted for widows, especially war widows. Plath would have been very aware that her family was different, and her mother made it clear that she was working for the children's good, not for her own pleasure.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the greatest generation gap between daughters and mothers. The middle-class mothers had been stay-at-home moms; they saw this role as the ideal goal and hoped that their daughters would marry men who would be "good providers" and

leave them free to devote their energy to child rearing and homemaking. But now their daughters in the universities had inklings of the women's movement to come; they intended to have careers, they tried to experiment with experiences traditionally male, they dreamed of opening locked doors. These daughters terrified their mothers. This movement gathered force throughout the 1960s; Sylvia Plath was ahead of the curve.

Esther sees her own mother as a major cause of her illness and presents her in a clearly negative light; it becomes a milestone in her therapy when she can say, "I hate my mother." Her psychiatrist recognizes her progress. But Esther, like Sylvia, sees symbol as fact; her mother is a symbol of the repressive time period. Actually the 1960s rather than the 1950s were the time of greatest estrangement between middle-class mothers and daughters; the mothers, if they went to college, often did so as preparation for marriage. Now their daughters were filled with ideas of professional achievement and personal freedom. The mothers were horrified by the rejection of their values; they did what they could to constrain their daughters' experiments and bring them back to the fold.

The generation gap was a commonplace, and everyone was talking about it. But Plath was at the early point of this rebellion—there were far fewer young women rebels before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published (just around the time of Plath's suicide), but the field was ripe for them, as it was for the book. Pressures were building to the point of explosion. Plath was just a little too young to benefit from the change, and her inability to accept any of the traditional expectations of her was still rare enough to be considered unbalanced. "What would have happened" questions may be silly, but they are natural. What would have happened had Sylvia's mother, Aurelia Plath, a very intelligent woman, been able to read *The Feminine Mystique* when Sylvia was beginning her adolescence? Aurelia was a woman whose life was controlled by practical needs; could she have understood the need for a personal vision if someone other than her daughter had explained it to her?

Some current Plath fans seem to assume her mother was a dragon. Aurelia published Sylvia Plath's letters home partly to show that Sylvia was normally an affectionate and sharing daughter, and also to illustrate that Sylvia was capable of delight and joy. In *The Bell Jar*, of course, we see only that aspect of the mother viewed by "sick Esther"—cliché-ridden, intrusive, and narrow. The abrasive relationship is intensified by the fact that the two shared a room—leading Esther to feel that the only way to get away from her mother would be to murder her. The concept of privacy is alien to Esther's mother, and Esther can find some privacy only by distancing herself from her. Her mother parrots 1950s reactions to mental illness—it is shameful, it is a choice, it only takes a little willpower to get back on track. (Odd, then, that many at the time also believed that electroshock therapy and lobotomy were good ways to treat it.) But the mother is only the repressive voice of the time; literal-minded Esther takes her as the repression itself. She disappears from the narrative as Esther recovers and heads off toward her own life—presumably as free of her mother as she is free of her virginity, another symbolic bond.

Plath in her journals made it clear that she knew her mother was a symbol of the forces that constrained her, but this did not lessen her antipathy for her. Esther is unable to accept a relationship that involves compromise; this inability to negotiate can be considered a character flaw or a mental illness, depending on where it leads one. Wagner-Martin calls it Plath's perfectionism. In the traditional bildungsroman an important scene is frequently the reconciliation of the adult protagonist with the parent who misunderstood him or her, but in this story the mother is simply banished. Sylvia, as Esther's creator, is content with this solution; she has simply written the mother off.

Another constraint is career choice. In the 1950s, most careers and other activities were identified as male or female. The return of the men from the war had brought about a reactionary spirit in the United States; ads and hiring practices were intended to bring men back into their traditional positions and send the women who had performed

these jobs during the war back to the home. A woman was supposed to be a professional mother. As historian Elaine Tyler May has noted: "The ideal was not only to be someone who cleaned the house and took care of the kids, but to be someone who became a professional, nurturing and educating her children, managing her household. A lot of women talked about it that way, about making a choice: 'I had wanted to be a doctor, but given the realities, I made the choice to be a career homemaker.'" For women, realistic career choices shrank again to the usual—teacher, nurse, stewardess, secretary—not considering jobs women were forced to take because they had no man to support them. The goal in educating a woman was often to make sure she could take care of herself if she had to, as Aurelia Plath had to—and as Esther's mother encouraged her to. The attitude was similar to that behind the "mad money" mothers gave daughters before they went out on dates—in case a girl's date should get drunk and disorderly or desert her at the prom for another, she could get a taxi home.

In the 1950s, middle-class women were encouraged to go to college, but they were not encouraged to be scholars. At the university level, there were still many majors that were exclusively male. Less than one-fourth of college faculty in the United States were women, and those women were concentrated in only a few departments. As in so many other areas, women's participation decreased after the war. According to Debra Humphreys:

> In the aftermath of World War II, women faculty actually lost ground. Around 1900, the proportion of women on college faculties was 20 percent. Their numbers gradually increased to 25 percent by 1940. During the postwar period, however, the representation of women on college faculties declined to 23 percent in the 1950s and to 22 percent in the 1960s.

Thus the constraining factors were very real. Many women who had ambitions that would take them outside the home felt chafed by these constraints. Most ambitious young women did compromise—they

said something like, "I want to write for your paper; I will do the one hundredth birthdays and fashion shows you assign me and hope to impress you so much that you will eventually let me do a real story." Many put off careers until after childbearing (and many never got back to them). Others took jobs teaching in public schools, because then—in those days of plentiful jobs—when their husbands wanted or needed to change locations, it was easy for the wives to follow. But neither Sylvia nor Esther can compromise—at least, Esther cannot do so before the end of *The Bell Jar.* And the ending suggests that she has learned to pretend to compromise.

Here lies the center of the problem of her madness or "neurosis." There is the particularly stubborn, uncompromising mind of Sylvia, represented in Esther's psyche. Her intransigence in the face of 1950s rigidity produces a deadly combination. She is not able to learn enough to get along from her New York experience; unable to change and grow, she cannot accommodate the challenges to her sense of selfhood. Instead of developing new skills, she loses her old. The resulting collapse is followed by a kind of surface attitude adjustment that allows her the illusion of possibility.

The ending of *The Bell Jar* is confusing because Sylvia Plath has not clearly distinguished Esther Greenwood from herself and does not see beyond the apparently happy outcome. The reader knows what followed for the author, and it is not what the book's ending implies. It is similar to Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the male story of an adolescent breakdown, in this way—at the end of that book too there is something out of kilter, a sense that there can be no resolution between the mind of the main character and the world. And if such is the case, what outcome can there be? Salinger's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, could just go live as a hermit, which is what his creator did. There is no clear solution for Esther. She seems to be headed in the "right" direction—she has overcome her fear of childbirth and has had a child, who seems to be the center of her world. But is this a triumph or a defeat? She seems to have learned to fit in with the world, or to ap-

pear to fit in with the world. Again—and then what? And if she has in fact changed sufficiently to accept the role society has defined for her—if she is truly ready to be wife and mother, consumer and housekeeper, preparer of meals and provider of support for her husband, the happy housewife of 1950s advertising—would that be the happy ending? What Esther does not seem to think of is that she might attempt to change the world, as so many women did a decade or so after Plath's death. Esther's compromise is more of a rout. The self is battered, bruised, and then patched up to limp hopefully off. It never merges with other selves, never makes common cause with others. But this is as much a part of the aura of the time as it is a characteristic of both Esther and her creator. Believing herself imprisoned captured Plath.

A reader who accepts much of society's constraint might find Esther cured indeed. After all, she no longer has a terrible fear of childbirth or an inability to commit—she has a child. We assume a husband, though he is never mentioned. She has written a book—we are reading it. (How hard it remains to distinguish writer from work.) But how she got there is a white blank. We have no indication how, or if, she manages to confront others as real people. They seem to remain body parts, even in the last scene. For other readers, those who cannot bear society's constraints, the victory may seem a defeat. Esther has assimilated, it appears. She may have written the novel, but what evidence is there that she is not turning into Mrs. Willard even as she writes? It is not only the possible return of the bell jar that threatens her—it is absorption into the system as well.

What would constitute a truly happy ending for Esther, and hence for Sylvia? We accept the end of *The Catcher in the Rye* because nothing is concluded. Holden is still struggling for "recovery." If we conflate Holden and Salinger we would conclude that he does not "recover"—he does not accommodate society but flees from it, as Holden pictures living alone in the woods and Salinger himself ended a virtual hermit. Would we be more believing if at the end Esther does not con-

form, does not marry and have a baby, but chooses a single fig from her tree of choices—to be a writer, a real writer, and devote herself to that? If she became a 1970s-style female adventurer? There is no satisfactory conclusion.

The story of Esther's struggle against the claustrophobic webs of the 1950s remains powerful. Students now tend to want at first to advise her—tell her that it is an illusion that she must choose only one fig, she can have a whole lapful of figs. But she cannot—not and be herself in her time. And retracing her story, most students agree—the bonds are too tight. A true genius does not make all kinds of compromises, write about fashion when she wants to write about the most compelling human, and particularly women's, problems.

The Bell Jar is Plath's life, as she saw it, up until her recovery from the illness that led to her suicide attempt. It therefore inevitably brings what we know of her to Esther. The equation provides another conclusion to Esther's story, Plath's suicide, which readers see hovering over the triumphant final chapter of her novel. Critics do not analyze Hedda Gabler as a mental patient because they do not identify Ibsen as Hedda. In *A Doll's House* (1879) as well as in *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen shows persuasively how marriage in middle-class society of that time and place stifles everything that is creative and spontaneous about women. For the women in both these plays, the only remedy is to exit the society—peacefully or violently.

Although some feminists have criticized Plath as a self-described victim, she was not one—her combination of perspective and circumstances helped to doom her. It is interesting that she saw herself doomed in the Greek tradition and used powerful images from Greek mythology to explain her fate. (When her son committed suicide in 2010, many writers affirmed that this was not a point in favor of some tragic destiny, but just another sad self-termination. But they did not sound as if they quite believed it.)

Truly, Plath's particular gift for intensity was also a curse. It consisted partly of the blurring of the edges of the two parts of a meta-

phor—what used to be called the vehicle and the tenor—so that she literally confused literal and figurative. For Plath everything was a symbol, and what used to be called the vehicles of her metaphors were so firmly fused to their tenors as to be indivisible from them. She was afraid of a room in her house and would not enter it—the room became the things she feared. When she thought of mouths or spoke of them they became alien oracles saying terrible things, rather than parts of human beings. Thus the symbolic rebirths so many seek in chucking their jobs or converting to religion or traveling to Nepal for her had to be literal rebirths—physical deaths and resurrections. Yet her symbols speak to many readers—they have an intuitive rightness, and their emotional intensity is increased by their fusion of literal and metaphoric.

Plath's sheer genius did not fit her time, and she constructed a character who demonstrates why. Compromise was needed to survive, and compromising brilliance only dulls it to the ordinary. Inability to compromise, to live in the world, can come from mental illness or can be seen as mental illness. But it can also come from the brilliance itself. Many ask, Could Plath have been saved by Prozac? Perhaps—but she could well have been destroyed by Prozac, rendered passive, accepting, and compliant by medication. Plath claimed that *The Bell Jar* was a "potboiler," and she intended to write another book showing the character adjusted, healthy. But given the individual and the society in which she was enmeshed, that book could not have been written. In some ways like Edna Pontellier's world in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Plath's 1950s world has no place for her.

The bell jar itself, as metaphor, and the echoes of it through the novel in preserved fetuses and glass containers of all kinds, again hovers near literal truth. Esther is enclosed in a distorted world and cannot breathe. Survivors of the 1950s feel it more intensely, perhaps, but the jar is an image for women's enclosure in other times as well. In her 1982 film *Mamma*, Swedish filmmaker Suzanne Osten uses the diary that her mother kept from 1939 through 1944 to show the development

of a young female film director; in the diary, Osten's mother wrote of the bell jar she felt surrounding her. When asked about that image in the context of Sylvia Plath's use of it, Osten commented, "This must be some common experience that women have" (qtd. in Inness). Is bell-jar depression a property of the 1950s or a condition common to women? This question cannot be answered definitively, but the image is a powerful one. And either way it was not just Plath's problem, but the torment of a whole class of talented but suppressed women, caught in the net of the 1950s.

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Biography of Sylvia Plath

Jane Satterfield

Achievements

A prolific and prizewinning writer whose exceptional academic performance earned her a scholarship to Smith College and a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, Sylvia Plath did not publish her first book of poetry, *The Colossus, and Other Poems*, until 1960 (she was twenty-eight years old at the time). The following year, she was awarded a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship to write her first novel, *The Bell Jar* (first published in England in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas). Although Plath had published poetry and short fiction in countless literary magazines since her undergraduate days, her work was not widely known until after her 1963 death by suicide at the age of thirty.

By the time her second book of poems, *Ariel* (left in manuscript form on her desk when she died and edited by her husband, poet Ted Hughes), appeared in England (1965) and the United States (1966), Plath had achieved posthumous fame as a feminist icon. The sheer dramatic power of her life story and the seemingly confessional nature of her writing, however, initially overshadowed critical reception of her work. The true significance of Plath's literary achievement was only fully recognized nearly twenty years after her death, with the publication of *The Collected Poems* (1981), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1982.

Since then, Plath's work has undergone significant reevaluation by critics seeking to illuminate the broader historical and social contexts that inform it.[1] The 2004 publication of the restored edition of *Ariel*, including a facsimile of Plath's original selection and arrangement, giving readers the opportunity to see the book as originally conceived by the poet, was widely considered a landmark literary event and a reflection of Plath's status as a major twentieth-century poet.

Biography

Sylvia Plath was born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932, the eldest child of Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Plath. Despite the significant difference in their ages (Aurelia was twenty-two when she married Otto, who was then a forty-three-year-old professor of languages and entomology), Plath's parents shared a Germanic heritage and a hardworking American optimism. Theirs was a traditional marriage, with Aurelia raising the children (Plath's brother, Warren, was born in 1935) while assisting her husband with his teaching and research duties (Otto Plath, an internationally recognized expert on bees, published his study *Bumblebees and Their Ways* in 1934). When Otto died in 1940 from complications of undiagnosed diabetes, Plath's mother took a teaching position at the University of Boston, moving her children and parents from seaside Winthrop inland to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where they would share a home. Although Plath was only eight years old when her father died, his death and his knowledge of bees came to play a prominent role in her poetic mythology.

From her early years, Plath approached writing with great commitment, envisioning herself as a professional from the publication of her first poem in a local newspaper at the age of eight. Throughout her schooling, she continued to earn prizes for her writing and drawing, excelling academically while actively pursuing her many interests, including drama, art, literature, theater, and journalism. Plath's education in the public school system, as described in her 1962 essay "America! America!," seems to have shaped the historical consciousness and political sensibility that characterize her mature work. Plath's early visual art and writing reflect an interest in fashion, an awareness of gender expectations, a high degree of civic consciousness, and thoughtful engagement with the dilemmas of postwar global politics. As a high school senior, for instance, Plath collaborated with a classmate to compose "Youth's Plea for Peace." This short statement, which appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, acknowledged the horrors of atomic warfare that had been unleashed in 1945 at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

pointing to the dangers of arms escalation and the contradiction in using missile defense programs as means of pursuing peace.[2]

As a scholarship girl at Smith College, Plath pursued the active social life expected of young women in the 1950s while simultaneously sustaining her academic ambition. She majored in English, studying the works of modernist artists and writers even as she worked diligently to master traditional forms and publish her own poetry and fiction in national magazines, including *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. After returning home from a profoundly disillusioning and exhausting month in Manhattan as guest managing editor for *Mademoiselle* in July 1953, Plath suffered a breakdown. Following a series of unsuccessful electroshock treatments, she attempted suicide and then spent the fall engaged in psychiatric therapy at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. Plath would later fictionalize this experience in her novel, *The Bell Jar.*

When Plath returned to Smith for the spring semester of her junior year, she resumed her studies with characteristic dedication. In addition to writing an honors thesis on Fyodor Dostoevksi's use of double personalities (a metaphor frequently employed in *The Bell Jar* and throughout her poetry), Plath continued to pursue her literary work. Plath's journals from this period (published first in 1982 in an edited version, followed by an unabridged edition in 2000) describe her desire to achieve artistic excellence and, at the same time, pursue the more conventional role of girlfriend, wife, or mother. Graduating from Smith summa cum laude in 1955, Plath received considerable literary honors, including the Academy of American Poets Prize, as well as publication and acceptances in some of the nation's most prestigious literary magazines, among them *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*.

While on a Fulbright scholarship to Newnham College in Cambridge, England, Plath met and married British poet Ted Hughes in 1956. Plath's journals from this period provide a lively record of her experience as an American abroad and detail her efforts to hone her craft even as she undertook a rigorous course of academic study. In her

voluminous correspondence with her mother (collected and published in 1975 as *Letters Home*), Plath described the marriage as a mutually beneficial one, with the two poets sharing drafts of their work and supporting each other's artistic endeavors.

Following the completion of her degree at Cambridge, Plath moved with Hughes to the United States, taking up a teaching position at Smith. While her husband's work began to receive significant recognition on both sides of the Atlantic, Plath was discovering that the college teaching career she had prepared for was not compatible with her writing. As a result, Plath and Hughes moved to Boston, where they devoted themselves completely to their writing. During this time, Plath attended Robert Lowell's poetry seminar along with poets Anne Sexton and George Starbuck. Following a cross-country camping trip, Plath and Hughes undertook a residency at Yaddo, a writers' and artists' colony in Sarasota Springs, New York, where Plath composed many of the poems that would make up her first poetry collection. In December of 1959, Plath and Hughes returned to live in England permanently. That spring, Plath gave birth to a daughter, Frieda Rebecca, and in the fall of 1960, she published *The Colossus, and Other Poems*.

In the collection's subtle and consummately crafted poems, Plath began to explore her personal history, connecting it to more universal narratives and archetypal images drawn from myth, visual art, and fairy tales. "The Disquieting Muses," for instance, inspired in part by Giorgio De Chirico's painting of that name, reflects on a daughter's growing perception that the world is not the place of her mother's fairy-tale descriptions. Throughout the poem, Plath employs elements of the fairy tale, invoking a connection to a specifically female literary tradition. The poet portrays the eerie muses of De Chirico's painting, bald-faced and draped in classical garb, as emissaries of an aunt not invited to the speaker's christening. The traditional curse that results from this social infraction becomes an impediment that a young girl must ultimately overcome in order to fulfill her destiny as a woman. Here, however, the daughter's curse is to be accompanied by muses

who consistently disrupt the lessons of girlhood her mother tries to impart. As a result, the speaker rejects the fantasy versions of life her mother has constructed for the seemingly darker vision of the muses: one that acknowledges the realities of nature and human existence. Framed as a discussion of the archetypal mother-daughter conflict, the poem also demonstrates Plath's awareness that the pursuit of art collides with the propriety expected of a dutiful daughter. The poem is a particularly rich example of Plath's exploration of the way identity is shaped by both gender and social convention, a theme she would pursue in depth in *The Bell Jar.* Other poems in *The Colossus* portray the vivid landscapes of New England, part of what Plath considered her "poetic heritage,"[3] often contrasting the beauty of the natural world with the toxic effects of industrialization and mechanization.

Despite its obvious challenges, motherhood proved to be a powerful source of inspiration for Plath, rather than an institution at odds with artistic vocation. By mid-1961, she was writing with greater confidence about the full range of female experience in her poetry and beginning to draft *The Bell Jar.* In August of 1961, Plath and Hughes left London and moved to Court Green, a manor home in North Tawton, Devon, which required extensive renovation. Here, just after the New Year, Plath's son, Nicholas, was born. Plath's hopes for an idyllic life in the country were short-lived, however; marital tensions resulted in her separation from Hughes, who moved to London in October 1962. Alone at Court Green with her children, Plath experienced an extraordinary wave of creativity, composing the majority of her *Ariel* poems during the late fall months.

Living in England, Plath had ample opportunity to read and to write for BBC radio programs, an experience that encouraged her to consider more carefully the auditory effects of verse on the listener. The effects of this are immediately visible in the *Ariel* poems. Stark and intense, these poems are characterized by a freer and more flexible style, which allowed Plath to integrate themes from mythology and folklore into contemporary settings using a colloquial yet commanding voice.[4]

The enduring popularity of the *Ariel* poems stems in part from their vivid immediacy and dramatic range. The poems are inhabited by women speakers—mothers, wives, and lovers—who have effaced their identities to fulfill the roles defined for them by the destructive patriarchal culture in which they live. In a powerful sequence of bee poems, Plath examines the natural order of the hive, a society organized to sustain the fertility of the queen bee. Her descriptions of beekeeping form a powerful backdrop to her reflections on women's creativity, resourcefulness, and will to survive.

Despite the innate beauty of the countryside she had come to love, Plath soon came to find the confining village culture of rural Devon too isolating. Determined to establish an independent literary career, she moved her children to a flat on Fitzroy Road in London in December of 1962. Although illness and bad weather compounded the difficulties she faced as a single mother, Plath continued her habit of working in the early morning hours before the children were awake. Though she had been publishing short fiction in magazines, the publication of *The Bell Jar* in early 1963 was a vivid fulfillment of her ambition to become a novelist and a harbinger of the future success she hoped to achieve.

Summary

For Plath, writing literature was simultaneously a means of increasing self-awareness and exploring the most significant issues of her time. Yet the importance of her writing has often been overshadowed by the details of her biography. Though she was widely published during her lifetime, her works did not receive wide critical examination or readership until after her death. *Ariel* was an instant sensation upon its publication in the United States in 1966, in part because of the changing social climate and the growth of the women's movement. Confessional literature, with its exploration of formerly taboo topics, such as madness and depression, had come into vogue. Though now widely

considered a classic, *The Bell Jar* was not published in the United States until 1971, a delayed release that helped create the book's cult status. It was originally viewed as a thinly veiled autobiography, but more recent assessments suggest that Plath drew from American popular culture of the 1950s as well as from the work of literary foremothers such as Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf.[5]

Despite the specifics of *The Bell Jar*'s postwar setting, in Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, we see the timeless story of a young woman's struggle to pursue her own ambitions while negotiating the expectations of the conformative culture in which she was raised. A young woman who is the product of a good family and good schooling, Esther finds the strict gender codes and sexual double standards of her time personally and creatively constricting. A fledgling writer and straight-A student, Esther resents the idea that her education and drive should be channeled into the subservient roles held out for "good" (that is, sexually pure and self-effacing) women: those of secretary, wife, and mother. The guest editorship at a Manhattan women's magazine that was meant to be Esther's entrée into a publishing career introduces her instead to a world of commodification that is completely at odds with her literary ambition. Esther's subsequent breakdown and hospitalization, however painful, allow her to strip away false selves of cultural and familial influence to pursue her own desires. Through the voice of her slangy and wisecracking heroine, Plath creates a compelling commentary on the pervasive hypocrisies of contemporary American culture and the challenges of female initiation within it.

Notes

1. For further insights, including recent archival discussions, see Helle as well as Connors and Bayley.

2. For further insight into Plath's youthful thinking about war, see Hammer 150-52.

3. For a discussion of Plath and the environment, see Brain, "Plath's Environmentalism," especially 84-85.

4. For a detailed discussion of Plath's recordings and her development of voice, see Moses 89-114; for further insight, see Wagner-Martin 83-94.

5. For a discussion of *The Bell Jar*'s literary origins, see Brain, "The Origins of *The Bell Jar*," 141-68.

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The *Paris Review* Perspective

Emma Straub for *The Paris Review*

> Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones.
>
> —Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

The teenage brain loves insanity, that quick-blooded rush of emotion that cannot be corralled into polite behavior. Like most eager readers in the past forty years, I first read *The Bell Jar* when I was in high school, where even perfectly normal girls have such an influx of hormones and crippling insecurity that they daydream about swallowing a handful of pills and curling up in the fireplace. *The Bell Jar* speaks to that girl without a single breath of condescension, and without a wrong note, and it is that direct line into the hearts of young women that has made Sylvia Plath a literary icon.

Our heroine, Esther Greenwood, begins *The Bell Jar* as a zippy college student on her summer break in New York City. Her neuroses and quirks—death emerges as a theme within the first sentence of the book—at first seem no darker than any girl her age, flushed through with hormones and the excitement of a life lived as a girl-about-town. When Esther is felled by food poisoning along with her fellow interns at a glossy women's magazine, the reader laughs—Esther describes each moment and feeling with such precise, cutting words that one cannot turn away. "There is nothing like puking with somebody to make you into old friends," Esther tells us, and by golly, she's right. It is as if Plath, knowing what darkness is to come, wants to offer some levity. Later in the book, we see

the early sections as almost hopeful, to have such hijinks in the recent past.

The Bell Jar was first published in the United States in 1971, eight years after Sylvia Plath's suicide at the age of thirty. When I was fifteen, I identified so strongly with Plath's description of Esther that I strongly considered the fact that I might need to be admitted to a mental institution, that electroshock therapy was most certainly on the way. Every girl I knew felt the same—what was so different about Esther, that she had taken strong enough drugs, that she had crawled into the basement? Like us, she was afraid to cut her wrists. Like us, she had mixed feelings about getting married, about having children, about her mother. It was that question—Where does normal take a left turn toward clinically, institutionally crazy?—that made us turn the pages faster and faster, as if hoping to find an answer hidden in the novel's pages.

The intoxicating friendships that Esther has with Doreen and Joan smack of college love affairs, with all their quick devotion and sorry endings. Her romantic entanglements are equally doomed and hard to watch. Esther Greenwood finds herself in a role she is not sure she can play, and it is both amusing and frustrating to watch her try. All around her, even in the hospital, people are evolving and improving, and the reader feels Esther's discomfort both directly and in achingly well-constructed metaphors—she says of the sun, "I wanted to hone myself on it till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife." Esther sees her life branching out before her like a fig tree, only to have the fruit wrinkle and fall while she is she making up her mind. When leaving New York, she throws her entire wardrobe off her roof, likening the experience to scattering a loved one's ashes. Even in metaphor, death is never far behind.

Now that I have reached Plath's final, frozen age, I understand even more clearly why the book speaks so directly to the teenage ear. Dying at thirty ensures that Plath never feels out of step with a young reader—in death, she remains contemporary, like James Dean and

Marilyn Monroe, forever young and vital. Without a follow-up book about the difficulties of marriage and work and the other facets of an adult existence, Plath and Esther are forever linked as twin mirrors for a young woman's reflection. Like Salinger vanishing into the New Hampshire woods, taking with him the future of Holden Caulfield's crummy adulthood, Plath took Esther's fate in hand with her own, from this world into the next.

The shadow of Plath's suicide looms overhead throughout the novel. Though Plath retains her poet's tongue even in the face of the ugliness Esther experiences, the prose is heavy with the reader's knowledge of Plath's death at her own hand. As Esther undergoes treatment for her mental illness, we all hope for her to get better, for her to leave the hospital, for her to leave home, for her to get on a plane to Paris and finally be rid of the darkness within her. It is impossible to read the book without the lens of confessional literature tightening its scope on Esther. One tries to resist picturing the young woman on the back of the book—blonde bangs strewn across her forehead, awkward smile—as its heroine, just as one tries to resist resigning Esther to Plath's ultimate fate. But of course *The Bell Jar* is a novel, not a memoir. Though the specter of Plath is everywhere in the book, the novel lives and breathes on its own terms. It is no morbid curiosity or snooping impulse that compels so many readers to pick up *The Bell Jar* every year and to discover it for themselves. It is the power of the book alone, written with Plath's incisive wit and poet's love of language, that makes it so irresistible. It is deeply sad that we have only this one novel by Sylvia Plath, but I would be hard-pressed to express regret or disappointment, when the experience of reading the book is indeed the opposite of that: the novel is a heady mix of exhilaration and hope. It is a novel's aim to be immersive and long-lasting, and *The Bell Jar* succeeds on both accounts, with the power of an electric shock.

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CRITICAL CONTEXTS

"The domesticated wilderness": Patriarchal Oppression in *The Bell Jar*

Allison Wilkins

Sylvia Plath devotes much attention to the natural world in her poems and prose. In his essay "'Bodied Forth in Words': Sylvia Plath's Ecopoetics" Scott Knickerbocker outlines several reasons for considering Plath an "ecological poet" (4), including her love of the outdoors, her concern about the potential destructiveness of technology, and her "desire for transcendence in and through nature" (5). In her book *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain devotes an entire chapter to Plath's environmentalism; Brain shows how Plath becomes a writer concerned with the "impermeability of boundaries" and demonstrates the influence of Rachel Carson on Plath's poetry. Brain writes, "Much of Plath's writing hinges on exchanges within a global ecosystem that includes the climate, the soil, the air, animal life and the individual human body" (84). Brain also calls attention to Cynthia Deitering's "toxic consciousness" and its relationship to Plath's work: "Plath's writing depicts the permeation and poisoning of the human body by toxic chemicals and pollutants; these *material* interpenetrations mirror the ideas of *cultural* movement and permeability that are also important in Plath's work" (Brain 84-85).[1]

Additionally, as readers of *The Bell Jar*, we cannot forget that the novel is set during the Cold War. As Adam Piette writes in his book *The Literary Cold War*, "The spectre of nuclear accident haunts the text of the period, taking form within the dissident imagination of a mental imaging of the visceral body suffering blasts of nuclear radiation, mutant symptoms developing within the living tissues of the equally mysterious anatomical world" (106-7). Additionally, Ted Hughes himself has commented on Plath's concern with the possible nuclear fallouts of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation, and Plath confirms these comments in interviews. All of this evidence leads to reading Plath's work in a new light. Plath's poetry is not the only place where these ecologi-

cal ideas are reflected; in *The Bell Jar*, Plath makes sharp contrasts between the natural world and industrialization, associating the male characters with the city and pollution and the female characters with the natural world, in order to comment on the unhealthy social system, the patriarchal world, in which Esther Greenwood lives.

According to Karen J. Warren, author of *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, a patriarchal society is an oppressive society that "justifies domination and subordination" (47). Man wants to rule woman and conquer nature: "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (Rueckert 113). Warren explains that there are many different "historical-causal" ideas and explanations for how men's domination over women leads to domination over nature. Some ecofeminists locate this domination in religion, others in the move away from an agricultural lifestyle, and others in the advances of technology and science. Warren writes that "the historical pervasiveness of patriarchal domination of women and nature has led some ecofeminists to suggest that androcentrism (male-centered thinking) is the root cause of environmental destruction" (22).[2] She notes that "the nature of patriarchy [is] an unhealthy social system" (204) where a "system" is defined as "a group or network of interacting elements regarded as constituting a larger whole or unit" (205).

When we connect the ideas of patriarchy and ecology, patriarchy becomes a closed system.[3] Plath's title, *The Bell Jar*, suggests that the focus should be on the closed system and how it affects Esther Greenwood. As Mason Harris notes, the "novel is enclosed in many prisons, all expanded forms of the bell jar" (37). In this case, the closed system is patriarchy, and patriarchy's demands on Esther are unsustainable. Repeatedly, Plath uses the imagery of enclosure to show unhealthy patriarchal social systems that are harmful to Esther, the other female characters, and also the landscape/natural world. In the same way that technology pollutes the natural beach and garden landscapes in *The Bell Jar*, the men pollute Esther by removing her ability to make

choices about her future. It is only through nature and women that Esther is able to adapt and evolve by the end of the novel.

As Linda Wagner-Martin writes of *The Bell Jar*: "One important theme is that a woman character cannot be seen as 'individual'; she is always a part of her culture. Unlike Thoreau, who can go to live as he pleases beside a secluded pond, Esther Greenwood—whose name suggests she shares Thoreau's bond with nature—is subjected to deciding what role in society she will play" (29). Lenny Shepherd, Buddy Willard, Marco, and Dr. Gordon all offer options of life roles for Esther. However, each male character has already decided what he thinks Esther should become. By trying to force Esther into roles that she has not chosen for herself, the male characters thwart Esther's ability to make decisions and oppress her. If the ability to choose is a life-sustaining activity, then the inability to choose results in the decaying of life. As Jeremy Hawthorn writes in *Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character*: "Esther is aware that one does not escape from one's past, from the network of social relationships that one has experienced, that easily. Her self is not something that can be defined separately from her contacts with other people, from what they have expected of her, done to her, forced her to be" (122). The result is that the more decisions that are made by characters other than Esther about Esther's future, the more polluted Esther's system becomes. The first law of ecology is that everything is connected to everything else. The outcome is that Esther's body becomes a polluted ecosystem that has been contaminated in so many ways with so many effects that it becomes hard to pinpoint just one reason the system is failing. In fact, all the causes are linked—some more neatly than others. In this essay, I plan to explore the possibilities and connections of some of the most notable of such episodes in *The Bell Jar*.

Three of the most harmful of the male polluter characters are introduced in the New York section of the novel. They appear with increasing levels of physical and emotional harm to Esther. Not only are these characters harmful to Esther, but they are also disrespectful of the natu-

ral world. Lenny Shepherd, the first male polluter, is smitten with Doreen. Lenny is a disc jockey who lives in an expensive apartment and brags of having "twenty grand's worth of recording equipment" (Plath 16) in his residence. Esther immediately notices the decor of hunting trophies:

> Great white bearskins lay about underfoot, and the only furniture was a lot of low beds covered with Indian rugs. Instead of pictures hung up on the walls, he had antlers and buffalo horns and a stuffed rabbit head. Lenny jutted a thumb at the meek little gray muzzle and stiff jackrabbit ears.
>
> "Ran over that in Las Vegas." (15)

The animals on his walls show Lenny's harm to the natural world. He brags about inflicting harm on the creatures and displays them as proof of his mastery and dominion over the natural world. And he treats Doreen with the same attitude. He liquors her up in order to have his way with her, all while Esther watches in a drunken stupor.

Lenny's job connects him to the world of culture, which is generally seen as the opposite of nature. This position allows Lenny to control what other people listen to, in effect, controlling everyone who listens to his radio show. Lenny seems to ignore Esther for the most part, tolerating her as a way of getting to Doreen; however, it is through Lenny that Esther is exposed to Marco, who will ultimately do the most damage to her.[4] While Lenny may not directly cause Esther any physical harm, his actions show that he considers all women and nature as objects to be dominated, trophies worth showcasing.

Unlike Lenny and Marco, Buddy Willard has no interactions with Esther while she is in New York City. It is Esther's recounting of their relationship interwoven into her New York time that places Buddy between the infecting city scenes.[5] Buddy is perhaps the beginning of Esther's pollution and decay. Their first kiss takes place behind the chemistry lab when he asks her to be his girlfriend. This is significant because in a prior chapter Esther has explained her difficulty with

chemistry and her preference for botany: "Botany was fine, because I loved cutting up leaves and putting them under the microscope and drawing diagrams of bread mold and the odd, heart-shaped leaf in the sex cycle of the fern, it seemed so real to me" (38). Plath shows Esther's preference for a natural science over the medicine and chemistry of Buddy Willard. This connection further aligns the division between the dualities of the patriarchal system: woman/man, natural/chemical, nature/technology. And it seems that Buddy loves Esther, from what the reader can tell, and for a while Esther loves him as well, at least until he is found to be an "awful hypocrite" (60), having admitted to having an affair with an older woman, Gladys.

Aside from holding tightly to a sexual double standard (where Buddy is permitted to have sexual activity outside of marriage while Esther is expected to be chaste), Buddy also wants Esther to be his wife. And becoming his wife means that he wants for her to "flatten out underneath his feet" (97). Part of becoming Buddy's wife is rejecting Esther's desire to become a writer and poet, as Esther mentions that Buddy tells her that marriage and children will change how she feels: "After I had children . . . I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (98). Plath uses the metaphor of political oppression to show Esther's fear of patriarchal oppression in marriage. Further, Buddy tells Esther that a poem "is a piece of dust" (64). He connects the writing to the earth in order to belittle nature. By associating it with dust, Buddy connects the poem to the natural world. He not only ridicules Esther's desires and aspirations for her future as a poet but also shows his lack of concern for the natural world by referring to dust and poetry so disparagingly.

During their courtship, Buddy, who is studying to be a doctor, encourages Esther to visit him at the hospital where he works; there Esther sees a cadaver dissection, "big glass jars full of babies that had died before they were born" and other "gruesome things" (71). The

main event during this visit is a childbirth that Esther witnesses. A woman with "an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups . . . never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise" (74). Esther also discovers that the male doctors have given the woman a drug "that would make her forget she'd had any pain" (74). Hawthorn asserts that the labor drug "symbolizes the way men force women to deny crucial aspects of their experience in order to conform with what men want them to be" (122). Esther's experience of watching a woman give birth at the hospital demonstrates how patriarchal oppression limits the woman's choice in marriage and childbirth. Esther witnesses an event that should connect a woman with her body and the natural process of reproduction, but instead the labor is hijacked by chemicals and technology. Labor and childbirth become other avenues of men's control over women.

As Buddy recovers from tuberculosis in the Adirondacks, he attempts to teach Esther to ski despite the fact that he has never skied himself. Esther gets to the top of the slope and observes, "The great, gray eye of the sky looked back at me, its mist-shrouded sun focusing all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill" (112). She propels her body down the slope: "I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery—air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, 'This is what it is to be happy'" (112-13). Plath connects Esther to the snowy landscape in a way that removes the boundary between what is human and what is air, blending it all into a moment of open, healthy system. This removal of the boundary between Esther and the natural world around her makes the next event even more complicated. A man skis into Esther's path, causing her to fall. When she reaches the bottom of the slope, her leg is broken in two places. Her moment of divine connection with nature has been suppressed by the male skier's ability to damage her. Esther is doubly hurt by patriarchy. The male skier cuts off her ability to function properly on the skis after Buddy has forced her to ski a slope beyond her ability. Buddy even seems to take some pleasure in the harm that is inflicted on

Esther: "A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face" (114). Plath's focusing of attention on the male characters as the inflictors of the damage is important, because it is not the landscape or the snow that hurts Esther, but the male characters.

If Lenny and Buddy both work to show Esther ways in which patriarchy can dominate and oppress women and nature, then Marco is a reminder of the potential for violence. Marco is brute force and a "woman-hater" (123). He appears with a diamond, a form of carbon (a natural resource) that has been pressed into a symbol of wealth and culture. Marco forces Esther to dance with him. First he smacks her drink away from her and then he drags her out onto the dance floor: "The hand around my arm tightened. . . . I looked down at my arm. A thumbprint purpled into view. . . . I looked, and saw four, faint matching prints" (122). After they dance, Marco leads Esther into the garden of the country club: "The box hedges shut behind us. A deserted golf course stretched away toward a few hilly dumps of trees, and I felt the whole desolate familiarity of the scene—the country club and the dance and the lawn with its single cricket" (124-25). Marco effectively contains Esther within a world that he can control. He segregates all women into one of two categories: virgin or whore. Marco's division of women oppresses Esther. He labels her a whore and attempts to control her body in the same way that he controls the landscape trapped in the country-club setting:

> The ground soared and struck me with a soft shock. Mud squirmed through my fingers. Marco waited until I half rose. Then he put both hands on my shoulders and flung me back. . . .
>
> . . . The mud oozed and adjusted itself to my shoulder blades. . . .
>
> Then he threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through me and into the mud. . . .
>
> Marco set his teeth to the strap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist. I saw the glimmer of bare skin, like a pale veil separating two bloody-minded adversaries. (Plath 126)

Marco throws Esther into the mud and bleeds on her face. His kicking her down into the mud shows his lack of respect for Esther and for nature. As Karen Warren has noted, "Probably no behavior of domination is more symptomatic and symbolic of patriarchy than rape" (208). This attempted rape demonstrates to Esther the lengths that men will go to in order to get what they want. If they cannot control her into submission, then they will violently force her to do what they think she should. It could even be argued that the violence that Marco performs on Esther's body is a foreshadowing of the violence that Dr. Gordon will do to Esther's mind.

In addition to dealing with the male polluting forces while in New York, Esther is tossed together with eleven other young women to spend a month working for a magazine. It should be a great time, but Esther tells us otherwise. Esther finds herself at a crucial moment in her development trying to figure out who she is and who she will become. This confusion in her choice of identity is what causes Esther to try to determine with whom she should align herself—Doreen, the southern sexpot; Betsy, the midwestern "cowgirl" and future wife and mother; or Jay Cee, the career woman.[6] All three of these women are linked to the natural world despite the pressure applied by the social system that locks them into the domestic sphere.

Doreen, with her "slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them" (6), seems like an exciting option to Esther. Doreen appears to be a woman in control of her destiny. Society will not tell her what to do. However, as Esther hangs out with Doreen, she is always surrounded by men of questionable character (Lenny and Marco). What Esther witnesses is Doreen associating with a man, Lenny, who wants to tame nature, as indicated by the animals hung on the walls of his apartment, and to control culture through his employment. Esther is disgusted by what she discovers about Doreen, namely, that Doreen willfully allows men to pollute her body. To Esther, the pollution is a permanent form of destruction, like the "irregular dark

stain" (25) of vomit that Doreen leaves in the hotel hallway outside Esther's door.

Betsy is the opposite of Doreen. As Esther notes, "They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile" (7). If Doreen is manipulated by the male characters in a way that is outside the social norms of the day, Betsy is manipulated within the social norms: "Later on, the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her" (7). At a *Ladies' Day* banquet, both Betsy and Esther become sick with food poisoning and bond while vomiting together in the bathroom. Whereas Doreen's vomiting results directly from her imbibing with her polluter, Esther and Betsy are poisoned by the food served by *Ladies' Day* magazine. The magazine's purpose is to show women how to cook and how to care for their homes, so Esther and Betsy are effectively poisoned by the social system that imposes motherhood and wifedom on them.

Jay Cee, Esther's boss and the editor of *Ladies' Day*, is associated with the plants in her office, "the window full of potted plants, shelf after shelf of them, springing up at her back like a tropical garden" (35). This association links her to contained nature. Just as a potted plant has a distinct boundary, so does Jay Cee. Even Jay Cee, a woman with a career and in control of her life, is married, and she is empowered only over women who participate in the domestic sphere. She sells the stereotyped idea that women should be good wives and mothers. Her part in the male-dominated corporate world is as unnatural as a plant in an office window. Jay Cee wants Esther to figure out what she wants to do with her life. Esther even envisions what it would be like to be Jay Cee: "I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were Ee Gee, the famous editor, in an office full of potted rubber plants and African violets" (44).[7] When Esther breaks down in tears during a photo shoot, holding on to pseudonature in the form of a paper rose, Jay Cee understands that it is because Esther "wants to be everything" (117). Esther understands that it is because Jay Cee's choice is not a real choice at all.

Esther's dilemma of choice is not made easier once she gets home. Traveling by train from New York to Massachusetts, Esther stares out the window and observes the overlapping of the boundaries between natural and technological: "Like a colossal junkyard, the swamps and back lots of Connecticut flashed past, one broken-down fragment bearing no relation to another" (131). Even Esther's body can be considered to be a form whose boundary is shifting because Esther is dressed in Betsy's clothes: "A wan reflection of myself, white wings, brown ponytail and all, ghosted over the landscape" (131).[8]

The bell jar begins its decent, closing Esther off to the natural landscape, when Esther's mother informs her that she has not gotten into a summer writing class: "The gray, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage" (133-34). Esther considers the suburbs to be just as confining as New York: "The domesticated wilderness of pine, maple and oak . . . stuck in the frame of the train window . . . the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies" (132). The suburbs reinforce the domestic stereotype of wife and mother that Esther has been working with at *Ladies' Day.* Not getting into the writing class makes Esther question her identity: if she is a writer, then she should be in the class; she is not in the class, so she cannot be a writer. It must be mentioned that the professor of the class is a man; Esther is again being told who she is—or, in this case, who she is not—by a male.

Forced to reevaluate her summer plans, Esther notes that "plan after plan started leaping through my head, like a family of scatty rabbits" (143). Her nature metaphor is then connected to industrialization in the next paragraph: "I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires" (143). Rabbits are notorious breeders; where there is one pair there will be many bunnies. Plath seems to be connecting the idea of choices with rabbits,[9]

where a few are okay but thousands lead to overpopulation. When she shifts the metaphor to telephone wires, she moves the reader to consider the damage wrought upon this planet by people, by too many people. In the same way that too many plans are harmful to Esther, too many people are harmful to the natural world. A second nature metaphor Esther links to her choices for her future is that of the fig tree:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (88-89)

This nature metaphor connects to ripening fruit. If ripe fruit is left on the tree, it will eventually rot and fall off. In Esther's metaphor all the figs are delicious paths for her future, and her inability to pick just one fig shows her inability to make choices about her future. Instead of having a plan, or making a choice, she sees all of her paths rot and become unfit for consumption. Esther is trapped by indecision.

When Esther visits Dr. Gordon for the first time, she describes feeling "stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out" (151). As Hawthorn notes, "The person harassed by contradictory pressures seeks enclosure but is simultaneously aware that it involves a

rejection of life; symbols of enclosure . . . thus combine a fearful attractiveness with a sense of horrifying engulfment and extinctions" (131). Dr. Gordon believes that he knows what Esther's problem is and prescribes his remedy—electroshock therapy—accordingly, but he does not listen to Esther. He is an example of yet another male character assuming authority over her and causing her harm. Tracy Brain describes electroshock, or electroconvulsive, therapy as a "hazard" that is "psychic, social and physical: a literal and metaphoric poison that circulates between the human beings who live in post-industrial capitalist culture, and pay a high price for the privilege of technology and convenience" (94). In order for someone to be cured by such treatment, the electroshock therapy must extinguish the problem in the brain. When administered incorrectly by Dr. Gordon, the therapy becomes a toxic chemical that further infects Esther as an attempt at controlling her. Dr. Gordon becomes representative of the technological advances that threaten the natural world.

In the scenes surrounding Esther's interactions with Dr. Gordon, Esther retreats to nature. The control of the patriarchy, as expressed through Dr. Gordon and the other male characters, causes Esther to feel trapped and oppressed. Plath creates many images of enclosure. An example is the people in Dr. Gordon's hospital repeating meaningless gestures in a waiting room with no windows. Esther wants to be able to do something meaningful, so she spends time at the Commons weighing her future options. She retreats to nature to reflect "in the shelter of an American elm" (157) and in the public garden near the "Weeping Scholar Tree" (161). These scenes with nature are juxtaposed to Esther's visits with Dr. Gordon in order to show that Dr. Gordon is a closed system—his hospital and treatment do nothing but cause Esther to feel further enclosed. On the way to the room where Esther is to receive electroshock, the nurse points out that the windows in Dr. Gordon's hospital are barred, preventing anyone from escaping. And when Esther receives her first electroshock treatment she describes it in terms of damage to nature: "Then something bent down and took

hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant" (169).

Just as Dr. Gordon and his treatments are types of enclosures to Esther, the industrialization and crowding of people at the beach become enclosures from the natural landscape. When Plath opens the novel with Esther's mention of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, she is using the execution of the Rosenbergs to connect New York City to the electric chair, technology, and something deadly: "Mirage-gray at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat" (1). Plath's choice to set the first half (chapters 1-9) of the novel in New York is an important one. New York comes to represent urbanization made possible by humankind's technological advances. Pairing the cityscape of New York with the electrocution of the Rosenbergs is Plath's way of aligning the city with Cold War and nuclear holocaust fears. Plath repeatedly shows the city to be a place of pollution and destruction, removed from nature or distorting of nature, and harmful to Esther. Esther knows that something is wrong and describes her inability to make choices as electrons that are unable to react: "I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work" (3).

While visiting Deer Island Prison, near the site of her childhood home, Esther contemplates suicide while sitting on a log on the beach. The landscape is described in terms of "toxic consciousness," where pollution and industrialization infect the natural landscape:

> The log I sat on was lead-heavy and smelled of tar. Under the stout, gray cylinder of the water tower on its commanding hill, the sandbar curved out into the sea. . . .
>
> I hadn't counted on the beach being overrun with summer people. In the ten years of my absence, fancy blue and pink and pale green shanties had

> sprung up on the flat sands of the Point like a crop of tasteless mushrooms, and the silver airplanes and cigar-shaped blimps had given way to jets that scoured the rooftops in their loud offrush from the airport across the bay. (177)

In her essay "The Postnatural Novel," Deitering discusses John Updike's 1990 novel *Rabbit at Rest* and its protagonist, Rabbit Angstrom, a character who "instinctively perceives the 'already-used-up'"-ness of the natural world. Deitering remarks that "perhaps because Rabbit Angstrom is himself in a state of physical decay, he instinctively perceives the process of decay in the objects, the people, and the landscape around him" (199). Esther is no different here. Sensing her own "'used-up'-ness" ("The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end" [88]), she is able to see and even empathize with the destruction and contamination of the natural world around her by the same forces of patriarchal oppression that are enclosing her.

The most important moment of this visit to her childhood home is Esther's confrontation with her father's grave:

> The graveyard disappointed me. It lay at the outskirts of the town, on low ground, like a rubbish dump, and as I walked up and down the gravel paths I could smell the stagnant salt marshes in the distance. . . . there a grave was rimmed with marble, like an oblong bathtub full of dirt, and rusty metal containers stuck up about where the person's navel would be, full of plastic flowers. (194-95)

Her father's grave is "crowded right up by another gravestone, head to head, the way people are crowded into a charity ward when there isn't enough space. The stone was of a mottled pink marble, like canned salmon" (195).

Esther's father was the patriarch of the family; in confronting his grave she confronts all of the different pressures she feels from life and

the patriarchy. Natural, wild salmon return to their natal streams to spawn and die. Canned salmon is salmon that is often factory farmed, a process that interferes with nature's life cycle for the fish. Also, canned salmon is symbolic of nature trapped by technology. The graveyard becomes an image of permanent oppression. The pollution and garbage surrounding her father's grave, paired with the image of canned salmon, suggest that not even death can reverse the damage that has been caused to Esther and the environment.

Heavy with nature imagery paired with images of pollution and industrialization, chapter 13 is spread over five different settings and is the most important chapter in the book. When the chapter opens, Esther is with three friends at a beach. Esther and Cal discuss a play "where a man finds out he has a brain disease" (181), which reflects Esther's observations on the landscape of the beach as diseased by humanity and technology:

> I lifted my head and squinted out at the bright blue plate of the sea—a bright blue plate with a dirty rim. . . .
>
> I rolled over onto my stomach and squinted at the view in the other direction, toward Lynn. A glassy haze rippled up from the fires in the grills and the heat on the road, and through the haze, as through a curtain of clear water, I could make out a smudgy skyline of gas tanks and factory stacks and derricks and bridges.
>
> It looked one hell of a mess. . . . The whole landscape—beach and headland and sea and rock—quavered in front of my eyes like a stage backcloth. (182-84)

In the mix of the landscape descriptions, Esther and Cal try to swim to a giant rock, "a big gray rock . . . about a mile from the stony headland" (183). As Esther steps into the water, "a little, rubbishy wavelet, full of candy wrappers and orange peel and seaweed," folds over her foot (185). She considers drowning, thinking it "the kindest way to die" because "some of those babies in the jars . . . had gills. . . . They

went through a stage where they were just like fish" (185). While Esther swims, we discover that she has unsuccessfully attempted to hang herself earlier in the day, but she could not find a place to hang, and when she tried to choke herself, "I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial seconds, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash" (186). Plath makes two evolutionary statements in this section, both of which point to Esther's frame of mind and the body's ability to adapt. As Esther swims, her heartbeat pounds the rhythm of "I am I am I am" (185), connecting her to the landscape. Before she can reach the rock, she repeatedly tries to drown herself, only to find that "the water had spat me up into he sun, the world was sparkling all about me like blue and green and yellow semi-precious stones" (188). She claims, "I knew when I was beaten" (189), and she turns to swim back to the shore. The significance of this is that nature will not let Esther kill herself.

At the end of chapter 13, Esther attempts suicide by taking sleeping pills and crawling into a hole in the cellar—symbolically attempting to get into the womb of Mother Earth, nature herself:

> Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. . . .
>
> At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom of the bottle, red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes. The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down.
>
> The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep. (198)

The only place that Esther can repeatedly feel like herself is when she is connected to nature. It is no wonder, then, that she crawls into the earth in her suicide attempt, or that she describes her slip into unconsciousness with beach imagery. But she also knows that nature will not let her die, so she takes the sleeping pills. If the sleeping pills are man's

medicine, then Esther is attempting to reconcile the patriarchy with nature in her suicide. And this is important because it shows a character who does not want to die, but rather wants to find the equilibrium between all the forces in her life in order to create a healthy ecosystem in which to live.

After Esther's return-to-the-earth suicide attempt, Philomena Guinea moves her from the city hospital to a private hospital with gardens. As they cross over the bridge to the private hospital, Esther comments on being numb to the gratefulness that she should have for Mrs. Guinea: "Wherever I sat . . . I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. . . . The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir" (216-17). As Hawthorn writes on the symbol of the bell jar: "It allows the imprisoned sufferer to see but not to connect with other people" (131). It is not until Esther begins to see a female doctor, Dr. Nolan, who teaches Esther that it is okay to make choices, that the equilibrium of Esther's system begins to return.

In the hospital chapters, most of the space is devoted to the various methods of treatment Esther receives and Esther's relationship with Joan. Esther undergoes electroshock again, but this time it is administered properly and has a positive effect on her: "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air" (251). Also, immediately upon waking from her treatment, Esther is taken outside by Dr. Nolan, into "fresh, blue-skied air" to walk "through the crunch of brown leaves" (251).

The women with whom Esther interacts in the private hospital are all associated with nature. Esther visits Miss Norris and her "purple, squirrel-collared coat and . . . her mouth blooming out of the quiet vase of her body like a bud of a rose" (226); Miss Norris never speaks, but Esther constantly encourages her to get better. Valerie, who has had a lobotomy, has scars like "horns" (224) on her forehead, and is described as having a "calm, snow-maiden face" (280), gives Esther some final words of encouragement before Esther's exit interview. DeeDee is repeatedly connected to a cat. Most significant for Esther of

all the women in the private hospital is Joan Gilling, "the big, horsey girl in jodhpurs" (226), Esther's colleague from college.

Joan's life is no different from Esther's.[10] The two young women go to the same school, and both date Buddy. Both spend time in New York, and both attempt suicide (which puts them in the hospital together). Joan follows Esther's suicide attempt through the newspaper as Esther later follows Joan's progress at the hospital. Both take lovers: Esther takes Irwin and Joan takes DeeDee. As Esther states, "It was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstance, like war or plague, and shared a world of our own" (262). The main difference between the two characters, and the one that results in the ultimate death of Joan and not Esther, is that the choices that Joan makes are choices that men would disapprove of. So, despite making her own choices, Joan is suffocated by the patriarchal society in the same way that natural resources are suffocated by overpopulation and uncontrolled growth. Joan's eventual suicide comes after Esther has sex with Irwin. Joan sees the blood that is the result of the sexual encounter, and it freaks her out. Joan's suicide shows her connection with nature. She kills herself by hanging herself "in the woods, by the frozen ponds" (274).

Another possible explanation for Joan's suicide and Esther's healing is the theory of natural selection. As William Howarth writes: "The Darwinian theory of natural selection . . . holds that variance results not from competition but adaptation to crisis. Darwin's phrase, 'survival of the fittest,' means not strongest but most fit, best suited to change" (78). Joan chooses to opt out of the patriarchy and becomes the example of what happens without change and adaptation. Esther wants to live as long as she can control her future. As she says, "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb" (258).

Attending Joan's funeral, Esther sees

> the rolling lawns of our town cemetery, knee-deep in snow. . . . There would be a black, six-foot-deep gap hacked in the hard ground. That

shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in the whiteness, and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave.

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.

I am, I am, I am. (282-83)

Esther is able to connect Joan's death back to the earth and nature and view the landscape as something pure and forgiving. Instead of the landscape reflecting destruction, Esther can see a chance for renewal. The repetition of the phrase "I am, I am, I am" connects the reader back to chapter 13 and the body's desire to live strengthening the impulse to evolve.

Tracy Brain writes:

> Plath depicts an ecosystem which overwhelms any sense of an individual self and body, regardless of its sex. A repeated image in her work is the movement of particles from one body to another, whatever the particulars of the exchange of fluid. . . . Plath is interested in the way the body is entered by different substances. No place is inviolate, or sealed by cellophane. No hospital clinic can remain cordoned off from the others, or unrelated to them. Nothing is outside the ecosystem. One must account for all waste matter. Nothing can be repressed or left behind for long. (131-32)

Brain expresses here the interconnectedness of all living creatures on this planet and of the flow of energy. As William Rueckert notes:

> The "one-way flow of energy" is a universal phenomenon of nature, where, according to the laws of thermodynamics, energy is never created or destroyed: it is only transformed, degraded, or dispersed, flowing always from a concentrated form into a dispersed (entropic) form. One of the basic formulations of ecology is that there is one-way flow of energy through a system but that materials circulate or are recycled and can be used over and over. (109)

Even though Joan dies, Esther will live. Esther is familiar with the cycle of life, as she claims that "people were made of nothing so much as dust" (64) and everything that lives must die. When we die our bodies return to the earth, and Joan's death becomes part of Esther's rebirth cycle.

In order to be fully "reborn" Esther must complete two tasks that show her ability to adapt to the patriarchal world in which she lives. First Esther must deal with Buddy. When Buddy visits her at the asylum, his car gets stuck in the snow, and Esther digs it out:

> The sun emerged from its gray shrouds of cloud, shone with a summer brilliance on the untouched slopes. Pausing in my work to overlook the pristine expanse, I felt the same profound thrill it gives me to see trees and grassland waist-high under flood water—as if the usual order of the world had shifted slightly, and entered a new phase. (278)

This moment symbolizes one of the first instances in her strength over the patriarchy. Nature has created a boundary of snow that traps Buddy's car. Esther's shoveling of the snow shows that she is removing the boundary of patriarchal oppression. She will no longer be beholden to its control or its definition of what a woman should be/do.[11]

The second moment of Esther gaining control over patriarchal oppression is through the narrative with Irwin. Dr. Nolan helps Esther procure birth control in the form of a diaphragm—a device that, interestingly, creates an impermeable boundary that does not allow sperm to enter. Esther is free to have sex. She chooses Irwin, and their sexual encounter results in a hemorrhage and a visit to the emergency room. In the last chapter, Esther calls Irwin and demands that he pay for her medical expenses. Her ability to make demands of Irwin show that she feels empowered to act and speak up for herself against oppression.

It is winter when the last chapter of the novel opens:

> A fresh fall of snow blanketed the asylum grounds. . . . Massachusetts would be sunk in a marble calm . . . the reaches of swampland rattling with dried cattails, the ponds where frog and horn-pout dreamed in a sheath of ice, and the shivering woods.
>
> But under the deceptively clean and level slate the topography was the same, and instead of San Francisco or Europe or Mars I would be learning the old landscape, brook and hill and tree. (275)

Symbolically, winter is a time of death. But what is important at the end of *The Bell Jar* is that winter is seen as a momentary phase, a season that will pass into the next, a boundary that is part of the cycle of life. Esther is preparing for her interview with the board of directors and her return to life outside the asylum. When she returns to school, it will be in the spring, which represents the beginning of a new cycle of life. Esther reflects:

> To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.
>
> A bad dream.
>
> I remembered everything.
>
> I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull.
>
> Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them.
>
> But they were a part of me. They were my landscape. (276)

At the end of the novel, Esther triumphs by rejecting Buddy and Irwin and their patriarchal oppression. She learns to make choices for herself. The last image is of Esther walking into the interview room, and the door never closes behind her, thus it remains open. She is not walking into an enclosed room but rather an open one.

Notes

1. As Deitering writes in her essay "The Postnatural Novel," "Rather, toxic waste seems to function in recent fiction both as cultural metaphor for society's most general fears about its collective future and as expression of an ontological rupture in its perception of the Real" (197).

2. Warren also discusses the use of language in "concept formation" (27), citing many examples of the ways in which language is used to undermine women in a patriarchal society. She writes that "the exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing (not masculinizing) them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing or animalizing (not masculinizing or culturalizing) them" (27).

3. Warren writes: "Since the health of a system is highly contextual, it makes sense to view health along a continuum. At one end, unhealthy social systems tend to be highly rigid, closed systems. Rules and roles tend to be nonnegotiable and to be determined by Ups in Up-Down, power-over hierarchies. A high value is placed on control and exaggerated concepts of rationality (even though, ironically, the system's survival may depend on irrational ideologies of denial and rationalization). On the other end, relatively healthy social systems tend to be highly flexible, open systems characterized by an absence of Up-Down relationships of domination and subordination. Problems are openly acknowledged and resolved. Relationships tend to be egalitarian, mutual, appropriate, and reciprocal. The well-being of all members of the system is highly valued" (205-6).

4. Lenny makes Esther feel dirty. She takes a bath to rid herself of what she has witnessed: "Doreen is dissolving. Lenny Shepherd is dissolving. . . . New York is dissolving. . . . All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure" (22).

5. It is also worth mentioning that all the issues leading to her "insanity" are discovered in the first half of the novel, so really Buddy is exactly where he should be.

6. Esther also watches Hilda from afar, never really having any interactions with her other than a conversation about the Rosenbergs. Hilda condemns the Rosenbergs while Esther sympathizes with them. Hilda also is "apprenticed to the Fashion Editor, which set her apart from the more literary ones among us like Doreen, Betsy and myself" (32). Hilda goes "to a special school for making hats in New York and every day she wore a new hat to work, constructed by her own hands out of bits of straw or fur or ribbon or veiling in subtle, bizarre shades" (32). Hilda is seen as an outsider to the system of which Esther is a part. Hilda's manipulation of the natural world in the name of fashion associates her more with the patriarchy and its control of culture. In fact, while Hilda is at the fur show learning how to manipulate nature, Esther dreams of going "to Central Park and spend[ing] the day lying in the grass, the longest grass I could find in that bald, duck-ponded wilderness" (33).

7. Esther admires Jay Cee and wishes that Jay Cee were her mother. Jay Cee's advice for Esther is "Don't let the wicked city get you down" (44).

8. When Esther leaves New York, she is dressed in Betsy's clothes, having purged herself of all her cultural attachments to the city life: "Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York" (129).

9. Dodo Conway, the Catholic breeder with her six children, is the character example of the rabbit metaphor. Esther is afraid of becoming like Dodo, a woman who spits out one baby after another, even though Esther is under the impression that this is what is expected of her.

10. Several critics have written about the use of the double in *The Bell Jar*, citing Plath's thesis on Dostoevski as her idea source, and I do not disagree with the idea of the double. Esther states, "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (240). Later she repeats this idea: "I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own" (255).

11. Buddy does attempt to get a final dig in at Esther by saying to her, "I wonder who you'll marry now" (280). "Buddy's gesture encompassed the hill, the pines, and the severe, snow-gabled buildings breaking up the rolling landscape" (280-81)—but Esther is not fazed by his taunt.

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Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Understanding Cultural and Historical Context in an Iconic Text

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Sylvia Plath's first and only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, was controversial, influential, and culturally relevant when it was first published, and it remains so five decades later. Prior to writing the novel Plath had published only poems and a few short stories, but writing a piece of long fiction or a novel was something she had always intended to do, as she stated in a 1962 interview with Peter Orr. "I always wanted to write the long short story, I wanted to write a novel," she said, adding that novels are able to convey "what one finds in daily life." *The Bell Jar*, set in 1953, chronicles six months in the life of twenty-year-old Esther Greenwood: her internship at *Ladies' Day* magazine and experiences in New York City; her return to the suburbs; her breakdown; her suicide attempts, one of which almost succeeds; her hospitalizations; and her recovery and return to college. Throughout these trials, she struggles with the cultural conventions of the 1950s as she attempts to pursue a course that is considered "un-American" and "unfeminine" at the time: her commitment to becoming an intellectual, her resistance to marriage and motherhood, and her desire to become a poet.

In her letters, Plath called her work an "autobiographical apprentice work." She loosely based the novel on the twentieth year of her life. During this period, Plath experienced a breakdown, attempted suicide, and was hospitalized at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, until she recovered and returned to college. Plath's letters and journals document the turmoil of this period in her life.[1]

Plath began working on *The Bell Jar* in 1961, shortly after the publication of her first book of poems, *The Colossus*. That year, she also gave birth to her daughter, Frieda Rebecca, and suffered a miscarriage. In 1962, Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas Farrar, and decided to sepa-

rate from her husband, Ted Hughes; she moved to an apartment in London with her children. As Hughes later recalled, Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* quickly and with little revision: "In the spring of 1961 by good luck circumstances cooperated, giving her time and place to work uninterruptedly. Then at top speed and with very little revision from start to finish she wrote *The Bell Jar*" (2). Plath wrote the novel under the sponsorship of the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, which was affiliated with the publishing company Harper & Row; however, when she sent the manuscript to the Saxon committee for review in late 1962, the committee rejected it, calling it "disappointing, juvenile, and overwrought." Plath then sent the manuscript to a British publisher, William Heinemann.

On January 14, 1963, the first edition of *The Bell Jar* was published in England under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." It is possible that Plath used a pen name to protect individuals portrayed in the novel. As Hughes puts it, the book "dramatizes the decisive event of [Plath's] adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival" (2). Upon its release in England, *The Bell Jar* received a limited number of reviews, most of them positive. Laurence Lerner of *The Listener* observed that it offered intelligent "criticisms of American society" and managed, unusually, both to be "tremendously readable" and to achieve "an almost poetic delicacy of perception." But the limited critical reception disappointed Plath.

The book launched what was to be the final phase of Plath's literary career. On February 11, 1963, a few weeks after the novel appeared, Sylvia Plath committed suicide. Given that her tragic death followed so soon after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, and given the thematic content of the book, the novel is often misunderstood as being altogether autobiographical. Many have also argued that publishers used the press attention generated by Plath's death to market the novel. As Marjorie G. Perloff points out, the dust jacket of the later American Harper edition melodramatically invites the reader to read about "the crackup of Esther Greenwood: brilliant, beautiful, enormously tal-

ented, successful—but slowly going under, and maybe for the last time" (507). There is little direct evidence to indicate whether Plath intended the book to be read autobiographically. The publisher's note issues this disclaimer: "All characters and events are a product of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

In 1965, Hughes edited and published Plath's most famous and final book of poems, *Ariel*. As she was writing these poems, Plath described them in a letter to her mother as some of the "best poems of my life—poems that would make my name" (*Letters* 468, 477). Some that were later published as part of *Ariel* were written on the backs of draft pages of *The Bell Jar*. *Ariel* remains a huge literary success almost five decades later. Before she died, Plath had prepared the manuscript for publication; however, Hughes did not follow Plath's wishes and published the poems in a different order. In 2004, Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, reissued the collection in the order her mother had intended.

On September 1, 1966, Faber republished *The Bell Jar* in England, crediting Plath as the author, and shortly afterward, American publishers declared interest in publishing the work in the United States. Much concern arose after Plath's death over publishing the novel in her native land. Sylvia Plath's mother, Aurelia, recalled shortly before the book was published in the United States, in a letter to her daughter's editor at Harper & Row in New York:

> I do want to tell you of one of the last conversations I had with my daughter in early July 1962, just before her personal world fell apart. Sylvia had told me of the pressure she was under in fulfilling her obligation to the Eugene Saxton Fund. As you know, she had a miscarriage, an appendectomy, and had given birth to her second child, Nicholas. "What I've done," I remember her saying, "is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. . . . I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar."

Aurelia went on to plead with the publisher not to publish the book, because of her concerns that the real people upon whom the characters in Plath's novel are based would be offended, but the book was published nevertheless.[2]

The Bell Jar was first published in the United States in 1971, exploding onto the best-seller charts. Since that time, more than two million copies have been sold in the United States alone. Bantam Books brought out an initial paperback edition in April 1972 with a print run of 357,000 copies. That initial printing sold out, as did a second and a third printing, within a month, and Plath's novel remained on the best-seller lists for twenty-four weeks. *The Bell Jar* has been translated into nearly a dozen languages and was made into a feature-length film in 1979 starring Marilyn Hassett. Another film adaptation of the novel starring Julia Stiles is scheduled to be released by Plum Pictures in 2012. References to the novel have appeared in numerous movies, songs and television shows, including *Gilmore Girls* and *The Simpsons*. The book itself has made cameo appearances in American movies as disparate as the teen comedy *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), where it is shown being read by the cynical feminist protagonist, Kat Stratford, and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), in which the book appears face down on the bed next to Mallory Knox a few moments before she murders her abusive parents. Often when the novel appears in American films and television series, it stands in as a symbol for teenage angst, often on the part of a female protagonist. In one episode of the animated TV show *Family Guy*, the teenage daughter, Meg, is seen reading *The Bell Jar* instead of attending a spring-break party. As Janet Badia points out in an essay on pop culture appropriations of the novel, "perhaps *Family Guy* uses the comical image of Meg reading *The Bell Jar* [instead of attending a party] to pose a serious question about whether it is fair to diagnose a young woman's mental state from the book she chooses to read" (154). Whatever the intent, it is worth noting that, fifty years after it was written, the book is still invoked as shorthand for teen angst.

Beginning in the 1980s, *The Bell Jar* was introduced to many young readers in secondary and postsecondary English and language-arts curricula across the United States. The book has been compared favorably to some of the most acclaimed coming-of-age novels, including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. As a coming-of-age novel, or bildungsroman, the book had great cultural significance for the generation that first read it in the 1970s. As Perloff notes, despite *The Bell Jar*'s seemingly dated setting, the book

> bec[a]me for the young of the early seventies what *The Catcher in the Rye* was to their counterparts of the fifties: the archetypal novel that mirrors, in however distorted a form, their own personal experience, their sense of what Irving Howe calls "the general human condition." (508)

While Perloff finds Plath's novel timeless and universal, the book's sternest critics, including Harold Bloom, dismiss it as a "period piece, a portrait of a poet as a very young woman in the long-vanished United States of the 1950s" (7). By the 1970s, Plath was as well-known for her legions of fans as she was for her writing. As Helen Dudar describes in her article "From Book to Cult," Plath and her novel became a "cult figure and a cult object for several generations of young and over-30 readers, many of them women" (3). For many teenage girls, reading *The Bell Jar* has become a rite of passage, whether encouraged by their peers or by teachers and/or mothers who were influenced by the book in their own youth.

As Elaine Showalter states, "*The Bell Jar* is very much a novel about the fifties" (438). But even as the novel is rooted in a distinct time period, its cultural themes remain timeless and universal. The narrative is infused with wit, dark humor, and truth, offering a hauntingly realistic representation of a female artist's conflicts and subsequent breakdown and recovery. The enthusiastic early reception of Plath's

novel was driven not only by the unfortunate events of Plath's life but also by cultural phenomena relevant to American readers during the 1970s and 1980s, which occur as themes throughout the novel, such as the impact of the Cold War on American society, the limited and restrictive roles of women in the 1950s (and their influence on the women's movement), and the prevalence of mental health issues among women in the United States.

Plath, who described herself as "a political person," opens *The Bell Jar* in the summer of 1953, at the height of the Cold War:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers. . . . It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.
>
> I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a couple living in the Bronx, New York, were members of the American Communist Party. They were convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and passing on secrets about the atomic bomb, sentenced to death, and later executed. By introducing her novel with a reference to a controversial cultural event, Plath immediately adds external tension and cultural realism to the work.

As the *New York Times* put it in an opinion piece published on June 19, 2003, the fiftieth anniversary of their death, "The Rosenbergs' case still haunts American history, reminding us of the injustice that can be done when a nation gets caught up in hysteria." The Rosenbergs' trial was one of the most polarizing events in the early part of the Cold War, at a time fraught with "witch hunts" for Communist sympathizers. The "hysterical anti-Communism" prevalent at the time of the Rosenbergs' trial, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's conduct of congressional hearings on "un-American activities," interrogating artists, writers, and

filmmakers about their affiliations with the Communist Party, constituted a defining moment for Plath's generation (Nelson 24).

The extent of the Rosenbergs' involvement in the crimes they were accused of committing was hotly debated, and doubts still remain as to how much Ethel helped her husband to pass secrets about the atomic bomb to the Soviets. At the time of the trial, controversy and opposition flooded all media outlets. Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and many others spoke out against the conviction of the Rosenbergs, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist existentialist philosopher and writer, deemed the trial "a legal lynching." But the protests were to no avail. Despite the outpouring of opposition to the Rosenbergs' execution, the couple was executed at sundown in the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, on June 19, 1953.

Esther's opening monologue, in which she equates "being burned alive all along your nerves" with the "worst thing in the world," reveals her preoccupation with death and foreshadows the electroshock therapy she will undergo as treatment for the breakdown she suffers later. Plath also draws attention to the parallels between the Rosenbergs' execution through electrocution and the "shock treatments," or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), that Esther is twice subjected to in the novel. The book includes a number of phrases found in Plath's earlier poems, such as her description of electroshock therapy, "darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard." The direct parallels that Plath draws between internal personal struggles and larger, cultural conflicts lend universality to the novel.

Plath uses the Rosenbergs' death, which she refers to on several occasions, to set the scene for her main themes. Ethel Rosenberg's full name was Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg. Plath's heroine is Esther Greenwood, and the similarity of the names draws a direct parallel between Esther and a woman many Americans believed had suffered a terrible injustice (Ashe 216). Ethel Rosenberg had two children and was often portrayed in the press as a bad mother. Plath uses her as a way of invoking the extreme pressures motherhood placed on women

living in the 1950s and of suggesting a climate in which being different or acting in a way that did not fit prescribed cultural norms was threatened with extreme punishment.

In *The Bell Jar*, "Plath equates sexual and personal politics with wider historical processes and breaks silences concerning women's feelings of alienation and barrenness, and the negative, devouring aspects of motherhood" (Blain, Clements, and Grundy 860). At the time she wrote *The Bell Jar*, Plath had become acquainted at first hand with the domestic ideology of the postwar United States. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in 1955, was the commencement speaker at Smith College in the year Plath graduated. In his address, he championed the "humble role of the housewife," who could take part in the "greater issues of our day" by devoting herself to home, husband, and child rearing. According to Stevenson, the greatest contribution a woman could make to Cold War international politics was to cultivate the home. While images of domestic bliss and virtuous mothers were purveyed in magazines, television programming, political speeches, and advertising, Philip Wylie, in his book *Generation of Vipers* (published originally in 1942 and rereleased in 1955) was condemning "momism," or overmothering, which, he argued, resulted in weak, emasculated men.

In the 1950s, women who wished to pursue intellectual or artistic pursuits were at a disadvantage. Women who showed intellectual interest in matters beyond the confines of the home were deemed unfeminine, and such subjects as home economics were taught to girls in high schools and colleges to prepare them for the duties of suburban wifehood. Women were rarely seen in positions of power. As Adrienne Rich recalls of her college days at Radcliffe, "I never saw a single woman on a lecture platform, or in front of a class. . . . Women students were simply not taken seriously" (238).

It is important to remember when reading *The Bell Jar* that in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, feminism was not in vogue. Although both decades were fairly prosperous, a woman's social and

financial standing were determined not by the woman's own intrinsic merit but by her husband's occupation and income. During World War II, as a patriotic duty, six million women filled jobs that had historically been carried out by men, and images of such characters as Rosie the Riveter, the strong and capable woman doing her part for the war effort, were encouraged. After the war, however, a wave of antifeminism arose, sweeping away the idea of progressive femininity. During the 1950s, as Betty Friedan so aptly describes it in *The Feminine Mystique*, the hard-earned advantages won by the women of the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century—such as the rights to higher education, participation in production, professional careers, independent ownership of property, and the vote—were willingly relinquished. Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham's book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, published in 1947, introduced the negative image of "lost women"—independent women interested in science, art, and politics or engaged in careers outside the family circle. Lundberg and Farnham argued that women who work sacrifice their essential femininity. The image of the intelligent, independent "new woman" of the 1920s was replaced by the ideal of a vacuous, obedient housewife who lives contentedly within the walls of a pretty home in the suburbs that she cleans and cleans and cleans. Dr. Benjamin Spock, who wrote a popular column in *Ladies' Home Journal* about child rearing and published a child-rearing manual still popular today, *Baby and Child Care*, proposed that the government should subsidize housewives in order to discourage them from entering the workforce after having children.

During the 1950s, the average age for American women to marry dropped to twenty, the "youngest in the history of the country" (Showalter 391). The role of housewife became women's default identity. In Shirley Jackson's comic memoir *Life Among the Savages*, first published in 1953, she recalls an incident that illustrates this point. Arriving at the hospital to give birth to her third child, Jackson is asked her occupation by the admitting nurse:

"Writer," I said.
"Housewife," she said.
"Writer," I said.
"I'll just put down housewife," she said. (68)

Feminist critics including Marjorie Perloff and Paula Bennett have analyzed *The Bell Jar* as a potent critique of the repression experienced by women during the 1950s. As Bennett states, "Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a book about women. More specifically, it is a book about growing up as a woman in a culture that is fundamentally unfair and hypocritical in its inequality" (103). *The Bell Jar* stands as a vivid portrayal of one woman's struggle within such a society and her attempt to assert control over her life. In the 1950s, women had few choices in regard to the trajectories of their lives. A woman's choice between motherhood and a career is at the heart of Esther's struggle, and motherhood is society's preferred choice. As Friedan states in *The Feminine Mystique*, "Fulfillment as a woman had only one definition . . . the housewife-mother" (38). In 1950s America, women were encouraged to be sexually passive, dominated by men, and nurturing mothers. "A woman who failed to marry was not simply doomed to a life of dissatisfaction or frustration. Without a husband and children, she would become little short of a freak" (Bennett 102).

This lack of choice came at the cost of women's mental health. A decline in mental health in suburban housewives is a major theme of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Examining a sample of twenty-eight women from an upper-income community, Friedan found that sixteen of the twenty-eight "were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized" (240-41). Doctors began to diagnose a syndrome in the 1950s called "housewife's fatigue," which was treated with tranquilizers.

Even at the outset of the novel, Esther feels out of control with the choices she is given after she wins a scholarship to Smith College and then a guest editorship at the *Ladies' Day* fashion magazine:

> I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America. . . . Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. (2)

Esther, however, does not feel capable of steering anything, "not even [her]self" (2). Plath depicts Esther's inability to choose, or to choose without consequences, with a vivid image of a fig tree, which becomes a central metaphor in the novel. The image of the tree spins through Esther's mind as she is waiting at the United Nations building before she goes to dinner with Constantin, a U.N. interpreter:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor . . . and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

Faced with choices in her life, Esther finds it impossible to choose one "fig" over another. As the novel reveals, Esther is told and shown repeatedly that her choices will have repercussions she cannot control. For example, she might choose to be both a poet and a mother, but as her boyfriend Buddy Willard reminds her, once she has children "she wouldn't want to write poems any more" (85).

When Esther looks to the choices made by the women she knows in

her life, she cannot find an acceptable model. Women she encounters embrace the role society encourages them to take as passive mothers, betraying themselves in the process. Examples of such characters include Esther's mother; Buddy's mother, Mrs. Willard; Esther's suburban housewife neighbor, Dodo; and her *Ladies' Day* intern colleague Betsy. Others, who follow their dreams to pursue careers at the expense of their femininity, include the *Ladies' Day* editor, Jay Cee; the unnamed visiting poet at Esther's college; and another intern colleague, Doreen. From her viewpoint, Esther watches her opportunities rot before her eyes as she returns to "the motherly breath of the suburbs" (126), finds out she has not made it into the writing class she had applied to, and subsequently suffers a mental breakdown.

Esther's paralysis and inability to choose derive from the fact that she does not have the choice to lead a happy and fulfilled life as an intellectual woman who may or may not want to have a family. It is significant that Plath sets Esther's breakdown in the suburbs, where, in the 1950s, many American women became isolated as housewives and mothers. Lewis Mumford calls the suburbs "an asylum for the preservation of illusion" and describes them as steeped in "isolation" (494, 490). In the 1950s, suburban housewives stood at the center of that illusion, in an isolated vacuum. When Esther steps off the train from New York, she is confronted not only with her failure to make it into the writing class but also with an overwhelming sense of female isolation. "It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything like death" (126-27). When Esther gets into the car with her mother, she feels, like so many other women before her, that she has just been handed a life sentence in the prison of the suburbs.

The Bell Jar is filled with examples of women paying for their unfeminine appetites and sexuality, and vomiting is used as a figure for both attraction and disgust. After a *Ladies' Day* luncheon, the interns pay for the food they have eaten with a terrible bout of uncontrollable sickness. When her hospital companion, Joan Gilling, tells Esther she

likes her, Esther replies, "Frankly, Joan, you make me puke." Esther is finally purged of her unnatural and un-American behaviors through electroshock treatment, a punishment that Plath equates in the novel with Ethel Rosenberg's execution based on questionable evidence. At the close of the novel Esther has survived (as evidenced by her small child playing with the starfish from a pair of *Ladies' Day*-era sunglasses); but she has survived only because her double, Joan, has hanged herself from a tree, an event that we can only associate with Plath's image of the fig tree. In the end, Esther leaves the institution "patched, retreaded, and [doctor] approved," but the bell jar and its "stifling distortions" still threaten to descend upon her life.

In today's world, where women have more say as to the combination of roles they wish to pursue, including career, wife, and mother, how does a text such as *The Bell Jar* retain its force? It does so much as other coming-of-age novels, including *The Catcher in the Rye*, remain relevant. By linking Esther's personal struggles to larger cultural themes and events, Plath paints an enduring portrait of a young girl coming of age in tumultuous times. In post-9/11 America, the threat of attack, and the threat of a common, often hidden enemy, is as pervasive as the threat of Communism for the readers of Plath's novel in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Therefore, it is not difficult to relate to Plath's inclusion of Cold War events such as the Rosenberg trial and execution and the controversy that surrounded them. We still live in a society plagued by materialism, where American leaders exhort the populace to buy products as a sign of patriotism. And while women's choices have evolved over the past few decades, the effects that the choice of motherhood can have on a woman's pursuit of a career and her life in general continue to consitute an important issue. Because of the relevance of these themes in today's society and Plath's thematic structure, tying prevalent cultural events with a personal coming-of-age story, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful, iconic text avidly read by a variety of audiences. Could there not be in today's society a misunderstood individual, like Esther Greenwood, who goes against the grain of

society, who isn't satisfied with the choices given to her by her culture, and, as a result of these irresolvable choices, faces a mental breakdown?

Notes

1. In 1973, Plath's roommate during this time, Nancy Hunter Steiner, published the memoir *A Closer Look at Ariel*, which documents Steiner's perspective on events that took place during this year and relates those events to what appears in *The Bell Jar* and in Plath's poems in *Ariel*.

2. Aurelia Plath's letter is often reprinted in editions of *The Bell Jar* as part of "*The Bell Jar* and the Life of Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," by Lois Ames. In a 1979 interview on the occasion of the opening of a play based on the collection of her daughter's letters she had published in 1975 (both titled *Letters Home*), Aurelia Plath spoke with Nan Robertson of the *New York Times*: "'When *The Bell Jar* came out in 1971, it became a very hard time for me,' Mrs. Plath said. 'It was accepted as an autobiography, which it wasn't. Sylvia manipulated it very skillfully. She invented, fused, imagined. She made an artistic whole that read as truth itself. That's why I had to have Sylvia speak in her truest voice, which I know comes through in these letters.'"

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Interruptions in a Patriarchal World:
Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*

Kim Bridgford

While Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is known as a thinly veiled autobiographical novel and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* is known as a memoir, these terms ultimately end up meaning the same thing. The two books have startling similarities. Each traces the breakdown of a college-age woman from her own point of view, her stay in a mental institution (even the same one, McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts), her relationships with her fellow inmates, and her subsequent recovery. The issue of gender informs both texts, particularly the role of female protagonists in a largely patriarchal world.

Both texts are slightly fictionalized accounts of the authors' own stays in mental hospitals. Plath fictionalizes her narrator, choosing the name Esther Greenwood—"Esther" means star, and the last name Greenwood is a family name on her maternal grandmother's side (Wagner-Martin 186)—yet the events of the book are autobiographical: the summer stay in New York City at a magazine similar to *Mademoiselle*, her subsequent summer of depression, her suicide attempt, her institutionalization. To readers familiar at all with the outlines of Sylvia Plath's life, it is clear that Esther Greenwood is merely a stand-in for Plath: the golden girl, or star, who suffers and rises again (Wagner-Martin 186).

So similar are the events in the book to those in Plath's own life that both Plath and her mother were worried about the novel's U.S. publication. In fact, Plath said, "What I've done . . . is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels after a breakdown. . . . I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar" (qtd. in Ames 14). Aurelia Plath went on to say that "practically every character in *The Bell Jar* represents some-

one—often in caricature—whom Sylvia loved" (qtd. in Ames 14). Ted Hughes, Plath's literary executor, even faced a lawsuit in terms of the movie portrayal of one of the characters, who felt herself too recognizable on one hand and too distorted on the other. Part of the enduring legacy of the book is that it underscores in painful detail Plath's own breakdown.

By contrast, Kaysen is more up-front about her book's autobiographical basis, even going so far as to include personal documents from her own case file to strengthen the book's sense of authenticity, although confidential information has been blacked out. As several of these documents appear throughout the text, they provide a visual—and startling—reminder of the book's basis in reality. Yet, since Kaysen wrote the memoir years after the experience and brought her skills as a novelist to the work—she moves freely between the genres—there is undoubtedly some re-creation and reenvisioning in the presentation of scene and story, as is the case in all memoirs.

The two books bring to the forefront the issues surrounding a text such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, published in 2003, which focuses on the author's incredible life of addiction. These days, readers expect more faithfulness to literal details when the term "memoir" is used. In fact, so large was the outcry about Frey's changing certain facts that he was ultimately taken to task on television by Oprah Winfrey. (It is not surprising to learn that Frey originally pitched the book as a novel.) Plath and Kaysen do not make these semantic distinctions, and, of course, *The Bell Jar* was written before the recent burgeoning of the memoir, which began around 1995.

Given that both *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted* offer explorations of mental illness, it makes sense that each text begins with the protagonist realizing that something is wrong. Plath's narrator, Esther Greenwood, notes:

> I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those

> uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing, outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue. (2)

The outer world mirrors Esther's inner turmoil, and the issue of betrayal is raised through the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case, since the two were executed as spies on little evidence, making the very fact of betrayal a double-edged sword. In the case of Greenwood, however, it is unclear who has betrayed whom. Has society betrayed her? Has she betrayed herself? There is a feeling throughout the book that she is being punished for something she does not understand, as she describes her state of existence as "a bell jar," airless and stultifying.

Kaysen does not use the same image, yet she, too, finds it easy to feel something is wrong and to move from a state of normalcy to a state of illness. As she explains, "It is easy to slip into a parallel universe. There are so many of them: worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps of the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it" (5).

Both women describe the suffocating difference between the world of madness and the world of health. As a result, there is a fear that such an experience can repeat itself. Plath writes, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream" (237). Greenwood asks, "How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (241). This is especially poignant, as Plath herself felt the bell jar do so, ultimately killing herself in her London apartment in 1963.

Kaysen agrees with this assessment. She underscores that

> in the parallel universe the laws of physics are suspended. What goes up does not necessarily come down; a body at rest does not tend to stay at rest; and not every action can be counted on to provide an equal and opposite re-

> action. Time, too, is different. It may run in circles, flow backward, skip around from now to then. The very arrangement of molecules is fluid. Tables can be clocks, faces, flowers. (6)

If the world itself can change so easily, then why not one's mental health?

In both texts, such worlds are shaped through the perception of the person institutionalized. Such a sliding scale of perception, which may emphasize either the illness of the protagonist on one hand or her inability to fit into society on the other, can make the narrator unreliable. Part of the struggle, and triumph, of both texts lies in the reader's decision regarding whether or not to trust the narrator, who has learned not to trust certain aspects of the world, such as carrying out fair treatment of her gender. Whatever one's talents, the world can be unfair, and the more one fights such societal inequities, the harder it can be. These realizations happen under the auspices of a mental institution in each text, in the tradition of the1962 novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, although, of course, through a female lens.

The lead-in to Esther's stay at McLean is more developed, and her breakdown more pronounced. Esther, like Sylvia Plath, has a summer at a women's magazine in New York City and moves from the shining glory of that honor to the dark hole of a summer spent at home, after a rejection from a summer writing course. The earlier success of the summer is forgotten, and the whole world is reduced to that one instance of failure. Given the diagnosis of Plath in retrospect—schizophrenia—such dramatically different perceptions of her experiences are not surprising, nor is the hyperbolic experience of failure in particular. Esther, like Plath, is a perfectionist. Like her real-life counterpart, Esther eventually attempts suicide and ends up being institutionalized as a result.

The novel, which alternates between the present and the past, indicates how various academic and societal pressures have helped to contribute to Esther's breakdown, holding the reader in suspense and fore-

shadowing the outcome. As a result, the novel spends relatively little time on the institution itself. The focus, instead, is on the gradual disintegration of the main character, her schizophrenia, and her inability to conform to the 1950s script for women.

By contrast, in *Girl, Interrupted* the lead-in to the hospital stay is less dramatic. Kaysen goes for therapy in order to avoid "picking at herself" (7), and a stay at McLean is suggested to cure her of being "tired" (7). There is the sense that the institutionalization largely takes her by surprise. Most of the memoir is about her stay in that institution and her relationships there. As a result, her own care is highlighted through various other inmates, largely female, suffering from a range of disorders, from addiction to anorexia to suicidal impulse. The book, then, has more of an emphasis on female illness in general than on one illness in particular; Kaysen's own illness is merely the occasion to examine a range of vignettes involving other women in the hospital.

Like Plath's book, Kaysen's is not strictly chronological, but here the book is broken into separate incidents, and chapters featuring separate people, again emphasizing the group nature of the text. These are framed by titles that emphasize certain themes, such as "The Shadow of the Real" or "Mind vs. Brain"; characters, such as "Another Lisa"; and sarcastic observations, such as "If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Now."

Both women find the issue of choice pivotal in defining their roles as women and in leading, in some ways, to their hospitalization. In one of the most famous images of women's choices ever written, Greenwood describes the paralysis that can overcome a woman as she attempts to make a choice that then closes out all other opportunities. She describes sitting in a fig tree, with each fig representing the way life could go:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor. . . .

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest. (77)

Kaysen finds that it is her idiosyncrasy, or out-and-out stubbornness, that marks her as different and possibly insane:

> My social worker and I did not like each other. I didn't like her because she didn't understand that this was me, and I was going to be a writer; I was not going to type term bills or sell au gratin bowls or do any other stupid things. She didn't like me because I was arrogant and uncooperative and probably still crazy for insisting on being a writer. (133)

In both *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted*, it is the unconventional choice—or potential for choice—that is part of the undoing of the main character.

Although the books were published thirty years apart—*The Bell Jar* in 1963 (first U.S. publication was in 1971) and *Girl, Interrupted* in 1993—and the period of time they cover has a span of fifteen years, 1952 in the case of *The Bell Jar* and 1967 in the case of *Girl, Interrupted*, the gender issues they cover are startlingly and depressingly similar. While Esther Greenwood is tantalized by the array of choices stretching out from her personal fig tree, she is aware that society sees this tree as largely illusory.

Two figures that stand out for her are Mrs. Willard and Dodo Conway. Mrs. Willard, who is the mother of Esther's potential husband, Buddy Willard, spends a long time making a rug out of braided strips, only to use it as a common kitchen rug. Esther thinks, "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (85). It is in resisting this role—and realizing society's

double standard—that Esther has difficulty. Esther does not understand submission. As she notes, "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (76).

A younger woman who has embraced this role is Dodo Conroy, typically pregnant and happy in her state: "A serene, almost religious smile lit up the woman's face. . . . Dodo raised her six children—and would no doubt raise her seventh—on Rice Krispies, peanut-butter-and-marshmallow sandwiches, vanilla ice cream and gallon upon gallon of Hoods milk. . . . Everyone loved Dodo" (117).

Given the homophobic nature of 1950s America, portraying Mrs. Willard as the lesbian love interest of Joan Gilling, Esther's college friend, was bound to get a rise; Dodo's name underscores her emphasis on instinct rather than intelligence. She is, to put a crude cast on it, "a big dodo." Here one sees the caricatures that Plath herself described in her fears concerning the book's possible U.S. publication.

Kaysen's most compelling characters are within the institution, and the memoir shows how these characters have short-circuited and so ended up outside society, given their inability to fit the stereotypical expectations for women. Whereas Plath's novel underscores the role of such figures as Mrs. Willard and Dodo Conway—the stand-ins for normalcy—Kaysen, by not spending so much time in the exterior world, suggests that the difference between the mental hospital and the outside world can be small. Yet while Plath's figures stand for normalcy, Kaysen warns what can happen to individuals who deviate from societal expectations.

One such character is Polly, who has set herself on fire. Polly has viewed herself as more courageous than others by having the strength, and will, to endure fire—evoking witches as a powerful, otherworldly symbol and Joan of Arc as a heroic, human one. Yet in a society that places a high value on women's physical appearance, Polly is powerless in the end and is made a fool of. Polly must "parrot" back the societal norms, and this can be devastating. When she discovers how phys-

ically disfigured she has become as a result of the burning, she shrieks with the pain of loss. As Kaysen writes, "Who would kiss a person like that, a person with no skin?" (18). Kaysen recounts the moment of loss not only for Polly but for herself: "Then she started to scream words. 'My face! My face! My face!' . . . And then I think we all realized what fools we'd been. We might get out sometime, but she was locked inside that body" (19). The price paid for being the martyr is death, disfigurement, or repulsion; moreover, all of the women are locked inside their female bodies, and, while they have not been disfigured, they are not men.

Another such figure is Daisy, whose name resonates with sundry allusions—"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do" and Daisy Miller, to name two of the most obvious, as well as the clear flower reference ("She loves me, she loves me not, . . ."). Daisy, who is worshipped by her own father, must escape to the institution for refurbishment, where she becomes caught in a bizarre cycle of eating roast chicken after roast chicken, cooked by her mother, only to leave the carcasses intact, in a disturbing display of appetite and skeletal nakedness. Daisy is vulnerable, like those chickens, both through her own femininity to be devoured and through her own human digestive system, which must be cleansed of the bodies of the chickens.

Daisy is a "sitting chicken" (akin to the "sitting duck"), and the obvious sexual play on her role as "chick" is exhausting for her. Ultimately Daisy is so exhausted by the enterprise of this cycle of gorging and cleansing that she kills herself. This "roast chicken" "cooks her own goose." This act seems foreshadowed when the chicken metaphor of her life becomes embedded in her own language. When it looks as if she is on her way to health, and she has her own apartment, she describes it as "one bedroom, L-shaped living room, eat-in chicken" (34). For a moment, this is rather funny, but then the fact is sobering. Once the chicken-eating metaphor becomes as real as life itself, Daisy must end her life, for she is swallowed by a patriarchal view of her. This provides another warning to women who attempt to gain independence,

or a space, outside the patriarchal eye. Here, in McLean, for these women, the repercussions of Daisy are sobering. As Kaysen notes, "We all observed a moment of silence for Daisy" (35).

Male figures provide important sustenance for the characters but are ultimately debilitating. The expectation is that men want to control women and that men let women down. At first, for example, Esther is flattered by Buddy Willard's attentions, but then she comes to feel controlled by him. Buddy is always quick on his feet, and Esther dreams of comebacks later, but, as Esther notes, "The problem was I took everything Buddy Willard said as the honest-to-God truth" (57). Her view of him is altered when she finds out about society's double standard. She is appalled when she finds out that Buddy is not a virgin but that she is expected to be one. As she notes: "Actually, it wasn't the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me. I mean I'd read about all sorts of people sleeping with each other. . . . What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and laughing in my face" (71).

Buddy is not the only one Esther knows who holds this view. She is depressed by the notion his mother propounds, that "what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" or "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (72). Since Buddy loves no one more than he loves his mother, Esther knows that he has inculcated his mother's views, illustrating that, in the end, the stereotypes of society must be passed on by women as well as by men. Buddy tells Esther that she will give up her writing after she has a child, and he also cruelly directs her down a ski slope when he does not know how to ski himself, with the result that she breaks her leg. While Esther is upset about the way Buddy exerts his will over her, it is Buddy's hypocrisy that ruins their relationship. Esther realizes that she cannot love him, for she does not feel they have an equal relationship.

Ironically, the roles reverse somewhat when Buddy voices his

worry that there is something in him that makes women go insane, and she responds, "You had nothing to do with us, Buddy" (241). Even then, he makes a parting gesture by saying, "I wonder who you'll marry now" (241), meaning "Who would want to be with someone who has been in an institution?"

While Esther Greenwood's father is not as prominent in the book as Plath's daddy was in her real life, he plays a backdrop to her suicide and escalates her illness. Since she has never visited his grave, she feels that this is something she must do—especially if she is going to kill herself. In short, she has some unfinished business with him. As this graveside visit is included within her series of aborted suicide attempts—from dropping razor blades on her legs to attempting to force her own drowning—it underscores the importance of the father figure, both her own father in particular and the symbolic father in general. Her father has let her down by dying. As she searches for his grave, she notes, "I couldn't find my father anywhere" (166). When she finally does find him, she notes her mother's comment that her father would not have wished to have his leg amputated—a common occurrence with diabetes because of the complications of gangrene—and so preferred death. Yet for a daughter during childhood to lose her father is the ultimate betrayal: "I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain" (167). She admits, "I had always been my father's favorite" (165), and this choice of her as "special" both buoys her up and weighs her down, a paradox common to women's experience, for while being chosen can be flattering, such women can also be threatening to men's self-esteem and can be "taught a lesson" concerning the unsuitability of their ambitions.

Male figures are not as prominent in Kaysen's book. The emphasis is on the women in the mental institution, and the men who do appear are typically not shown in a flattering light. One dominant male figure is Kaysen's doctor, the one who committed her. Kaysen explores the reasons he could make a decision to commit her to an institution in roughly twenty minutes: one is her confession of a botched suicide at-

tempt. Again, the emphasis in Kaysen's book is on the general rather than the particular. She believes she was institutionalized for being a type of person—a hippie—and for being a type of woman: "What are these kids doing? And then one of them walks into his office wearing a skirt the size of a napkin, with a mottled chin and speaking in monosyllables. . . . It's a mean world out there. . . . He can't in good conscience send her back into it" (40). She notes, from a distance and almost in passing, that he was "accused of sexual harassment" (40). Ultimately, her fate lies in his hands, and she notes with a morbid humor, "Maybe it was just too early in the morning for him" (40). His decision has long-range repercussions, and Kaysen notes that such decisions are often left in the hands of men.

Although Kaysen has a more optimistic view of men, in the end, than does Plath, even her potential husband has absorbed the stereotypes of patriarchal society. When she has said yes to marriage, she is asked by other inmates what marriage will be like, and she says, "Nothing. . . . It's quiet. It's like—I don't know. It's like falling off a cliff. . . . I guess my life will just stop when I get married" (136).

Both books use the concept of doubles to reinforce the themes of the text. Sometimes these doubles can illustrate opposites, or they can show the repercussions of positive and negative outcomes. For example, Betsy and Doreen illustrate two dramatic ways in which Esther can pursue her life in New York City. Betsy symbolizes innocence and Doreen experience. Esther says: "They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile. . . . Betsy was always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way. She never asked Doreen. In private, Doreen called her Pollyanna Cowgirl" (6). By contrast, Doreen oozes sophistication: "Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting powder. She smelled strong as a whole perfume store" (7).

Esther longs to be like Doreen but at the same time feels distanced from her and is repelled by her. In fact, when she is out with Doreen and two men—Lenny Shepherd, a famous disc jockey, and his friend Frankie—she is ashamed enough to use an alias: Elly Higginbottom. When Esther leaves Doreen with Lenny and walks home, she takes a cleansing bath, thinking,

> Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure. (20)

Then she goes to bed. Later, when Doreen knocks on her door, drunk, Esther leaves her to lie in the hallway. She says to herself, "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (22). This doubling relates to the virgin/whore dichotomy determined for women by society and especially emphasized, in this text, by Mrs. Willard. Esther's difficulty is that she would like to have the freedom to have the experiences of someone like Doreen while still being perceived as a Betsy. What Esther discovers, in short, is that she would like to be a woman but with all the privileges of being a man.

Another important double for Esther in the novel is Joan Gilling. Joan mirrors Esther in a range of ways. She too goes to Smith, she has dated Buddy Willard, and she ultimately ends up in the same mental hospital. As Esther points out, "Joan's room, with its closet and bureau and table and chair and white blanket with the big blue C on it, was a mirror image of my own" (195). Given her state of mind upon entering the institution, Esther feels her mind is playing tricks when she sees Joan there. Joan too has attempted suicide, and, in hearing of this

fact—Joan has attempted to cut her wrists by punching them through glass—Esther thinks, "For the first time it occurred to me Joan and I might have something in common" (199).

While at first Esther uses Joan as a measuring stick of health—and monitors Joan's progress through the reward system of the institution—she also uses Joan to get a better sense of who she is as an individual and of her own sexuality. While Esther has some difficult experiences with men—perhaps most clearly identified through the "woman-hater" Marco—she still loves men and defines herself as heterosexual.

When Esther is confronted by Joan's lesbian orientation, she is shocked. She realizes that Joan probably likes Mrs. Willard more than she does Buddy Willard, and it takes a moment for her to understand the situation when she views Joan in bed with DeeDee at the institution. Esther thinks:

> I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. (219)

Esther goes so far as to say, "You make me puke, if you want to know" (220). In this way, Esther, who otherwise is struggling against the gender constraints of her culture, is exhibiting her own societal prejudice and uses this distinction between Joan and herself as a way to mark her own superiority.

Ultimately the measuring stick of health works in Esther's favor. While at first Esther is jealous of Joan's privileges, in the end she gains a sense of her own independence through birth control and initiates, through her choice of a young college professor, her own painful and dramatic deflowering (incredibly, she has to go to an emergency room to stop the bleeding). Joan, by contrast, loses a sense of her own inde-

pendence and, ultimately, kills herself. So intertwined are the two as doubles that Esther, in fact, thinks: "For a minute I wondered if Doctor Quinn was going to blame me for Joan's return to the asylum. I still wasn't sure how much Joan knew, after our trip to the Emergency Ward, but a few days later she had come back to live in Belsize, retaining, however, the freest of town privileges" (234). Ironically, Joan kills herself by a method that Esther had not been able to employ during her earlier lackluster suicide attempts: hanging. Esther, by contrast, goes on to survive, have a baby, and move on in her life.

The use of doubles in Kaysen's book is more complicated, as there are countless doubles, an endless gender mirror of consideration. Each woman can focus on exterior beauty, or sexuality, or drugs, and she can step over, for a time, into a "parallel universe." The book parallels the philosophy of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, where the point is to see the importance of similarity rather than difference. Plath's book, instead, is about the difficulties that can come with the emphasis on the special, the privileged, the outsider.

Kaysen goes so far as to use two inmates named Lisa to illustrate the fact of their interchangeability, showing how an individual's copying of another's patterns can be destructive. Each Lisa wants to be the dominant Lisa. For example, when the second Lisa arrives, there has to be a realignment: "One day a second Lisa arrived. We called her by her full name, Lisa Cody, to distinguish her from the real Lisa, who remained simply Lisa, like a queen" (58). At first the two Lisas merge and have an intense friendship; Lisa Cody even gets the same ultimate diagnosis as Lisa, that of "sociopath" (59). They are referred to as "the Lisas" (59).

Yet ultimately only one Lisa can be ruler, or queen, of the madhouse. When Lisa Cody attempts to match Lisa stunt for stunt, she is outmatched and humiliated. Kaysen remarks: "Then they had a life history battle. . . . Speed, black beauties, coke, heroin—Lisa had done it all. Lisa Cody said she'd been a junkie too. . . . 'A suburban junkie,' said Lisa. 'You were playing; that's what'" (60). In the end, Lisa Cody

is forced out through a cruel stunt, and she runs away. When asked what has happened to Lisa Cody, Lisa says, "'She's a real junkie now'" (62). While two sociopathic personalities are at play, making the gender cocktail more powerful, the two Lisas illustrate that competition is counterproductive, whereas cooperation, which has not been sought, is healthy, sane, and empowering.

In the end, both Greenwood and Kaysen return to life outside the bell jar and to the parallel universe of health. Because readers are so caught up with the dramatic surface stories of the books—the time at *Ladies' Day* magazine, the breakdowns, the suicide attempts—they can forget that the books are told from the point of view of survivors. Esther is playing with her baby, using one of the gifts from that New York summer, thinking about the past:

> I still have the makeup kit they gave me. . . . I also have a white plastic sunglasses case with colored shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed onto it. . . . For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with. (3)

While the choice to use birth control is important, as is her choice not to pursue a relationship with Buddy Willard, Esther's steps to health are gradual. In fact, she notes, as she is about to be released from the hospital, "There ought . . . to be a ritual for being born twice" (244). Life is instead shaped by the hundreds of small decisions that accrue, once life has been chosen over death.

Kaysen, too, gradually returns to health. She gets a job; she meets the man who will be her husband; she begins existing in the outside world. In fact, the process is so gradual that she spends the last couple of chapters exploring the nature of mental illness itself, as if understanding the situation will prevent its happening again. There is no "aha" moment. As she says: "I got better and Daisy didn't and I can't

explain why. . . . It's a common phrase, I know. But it means something particular to me: the tunnels, the security screens, the plastic forks, the shimmering, ever-shifting borderline that like all boundaries beckons and asks to be crossed. I do not want to cross it again" (159).

The concluding images of the two books are resonant of both fictional and real-life narrators. While Plath's book ends with the walk to freedom, there is more than a note of hesitation—especially with the death of Joan Gilling shortly before—and, of course, most readers know the fate of Plath herself, whose mental suffering eventually drove her to suicide. Esther muses: "I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead—after all, I had been 'analyzed.' Instead, all I could see were question marks" (243).

By contrast, Susanna Kaysen is left with the image of the painting that has haunted her for years, and that she now sees differently. Looking at Jan Vermeer's "Girl Interrupted at Her Music," she sees the youth of the girl as well as her imprisonment: "She had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her attention. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would see her" (167). Kaysen, from an older perspective, "sees" that younger self and acknowledges it. Moreover, she considers the golden light of art, which makes everything beautiful. In life, we cannot see everything in this way, with the importance, richness, and recognition it deserves. Kaysen notes this fact, saying, "The girl at her music sits in another sort of light, the fitful, overcast light of life, by which we see ourselves and others only imperfectly, and seldom" (168).

Just as Kaysen ultimately "sees" the girl in the painting, Plath and Kaysen allow *us* to see *them* in their respective texts, frozen in time; and, if they are flawed in those texts, they provide glimpses of worlds rarely seen, and even more rarely recorded, especially from a woman's perspective. The irony is that when we finish each text, covering the imperfections of a woman's life, we are left with the golden afterglow

of art, something that human life itself, with its constant movement and interplay of pain and joy, struggles to give us.

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Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Critical Reception

Ellen McGrath Smith

First appearing in England (published by Heinemann) under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963, *The Bell Jar* was Sylvia Plath's first and only published novel. Plath wrote it in the space of a few months while living in a country cottage in Devon, England, with her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, and their infant daughter, Frieda. Prior titles considered for the work were *Diary of a Suicide* (Badia) and *The Girl in the Mirror* (Bourjaily). Not long after the novel's release in 1963 to modestly favorable reviews of a first novel by an American woman author, Plath committed suicide in the London flat where she, separated from her husband, was spending one of the coldest winters in English history with her two small children (son Nicholas was born in 1962).

Among biographers and those close to her, there is some disagreement concerning Plath's choice to publish the book under a pseudonym. Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath (d. 1994), fought the U.S. publication of the book for eight years on grounds that its autobiographical framework would offend real persons on whom many of its characters were based, claiming that Plath had no intention of its being published in the United States under her name and that, in letters to both her and Plath's younger brother, Warren, the author dismissed the work as a "potboiler" having little to do with her more serious work as a poet. Critic, friend, and biographer A. Alvarez concurred that Plath viewed the novel as "autobiographical apprentice work which she had to write in order to free herself from the past" (198). At the same time, Plath's friend Peter Davison and one of her biographers, Anne Stevenson, have asserted that Plath herself initially sought U.S. publication for the novel but was not successful. More recent archival studies have confirmed this latter point (Peel, "Manuscripts").

In 1966, three years following Plath's suicide at age thirty, Faber & Faber (in England) published *The Bell Jar* under the author's own

name. In 1971, Harper & Row—the New York publisher that had initially rejected the novel when Plath had submitted it—published the first U.S. edition, under Plath's name, with some drawings by Plath and a brief biographical sketch by Lois Ames. Long "banned" from U.S. readership by the efforts of the Plath estate, the novel quickly rose on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and Bantam's 1972 initial paperback edition went through three printings in its first month, according to Plath biographer Paul Alexander (qtd. in Badia, 128-29). The novel has led a healthy published life since then. A film version (directed by Larry Peerce) released in 1979 sparked a libel lawsuit that was not settled until the late 1980s (Macpherson); another film adaptation, to be directed by Nicole Kassell and starring Julia Stiles, is scheduled for a 2012 release. *The Bell Jar* has become, like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, iconic, recognizable even to nonreaders as an anthem of adolescent emotional struggle within the prosperity and conformity of postwar America.

Plath's suicide and her gradual canonization as one of America's great poets have both had impacts on the critical responses to *The Bell Jar.* On one hand, there is concern that the sensationalism around the novelist's life and death either inflates or detracts from the literary merit of the work. On the other hand, there has been a strong critical line claiming that the *Ariel* poems Plath wrote in the weeks preceding her death were her most realized and authentic poems; this line has been largely built on the foundation of Ted Hughes's commentary on his late wife's work asserting that, though Plath labored to be a successful prose writer, it was only in these late poems that her "genius" was given full scope.

Initial Responses: In Search of the "Innocent" Reading

The brief lapse in time between the publication of Plath's novel under the Victoria Lucas pseudonym and the shocking news of her sui-

cide allowed for very few "innocent" readings of the novel, or readings that did not attach the work of fiction to the young mother who gassed herself on a cold morning in London. Furthermore, as Plath was married to one of England's more promising young poets, some critics, including Frances McCullough, have suggested that many literary persons in London would have known who was behind the pseudonym (qtd. in Brain 2). Nonetheless, there was a certain amount of critical response to the novel that took it, more or less, at face value. Janet Badia observes that "almost twenty magazines and newspapers, many of them local, reviewed the novel" and that, overall, "Plath fared no worse than most first-time novelists" (127). As Linda Wagner-Martin notes, the comparison to *The Catcher in the Rye* was common, both initially and in subsequent British and U.S. releases of the novel well into the 1970s (*"Bell Jar"* 10). Laurence Lerner, in a review for *The Listener*, praised the novel's brilliance of both "language and characterization" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin, *"Bell Jar"* 11); *New Statesman* reviewer Robert Taubman termed it a "'clever first novel'" (qtd. in Badia 127); and an unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* proclaimed that, while "'few writers are able to create a different world for you to live in[,] Miss Lucas has done just this'" (qtd. in Brain 2). In a less glowing review, Simon Raven, writing for the *Spectator*, gave grudging praise to the American Victoria Lucas while voicing his preference for the funnier and more competent work of "'her English counterpart, Miss Jennifer Dawson'" (qtd. in Badia 127).

Responses to the 1966 publication of *The Bell Jar* in the United Kingdom under Plath's name were hard-pressed to remain impervious not only to the sensationalism of Plath's suicide but also to the passion, violence, and innovation of her *Ariel* poems, a British edition of which appeared in 1965. Clearly, the temptation to use the poems to read the novel, and vice versa, was difficult to resist; Taubman, who had reviewed the novel more innocently in 1963, now found that the novel, next to the fiery poems of *Ariel*, lost a good deal of its luster (Badia 127). Plath had already published her first collection of poems, *The*

Colossus, and Other Poems, in 1960 in the United Kingdom, but it was *Ariel* that was viewed as being closest to the flame of her feverish last days.

Ariel was published in the United States in 1966. By the time *The Bell Jar* finally received a U.S. imprint in 1971, the Plath legend was well in place, as the *Ariel* poems had come to signal the American poetic confessional voice, as well as to stand for a feminine rage that had been diagnosed in the early 1960s by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, was further articulated and given lyric shape by poets such as Adrienne Rich (whom Plath had viewed as a rival in the 1950s), and was becoming a household term as, over the course of the 1970s, second-wave feminism moved from the fringes to the mainstream. Still, when reviewers approached Plath's novel, they often voiced the intention to see it in its own right, even when they often ended up straying from that intention by conflating the novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, with the real Plath of the summer of 1953 or by treating the novel as, at best, a biographical gloss to the more rarified private imagery of the poems. Robert Scholes, in the *New York Times Book Review*, took the novel seriously as literature, calling it "the kind of book Salinger's Franny [from the 1961 J. D. Salinger story collection *Franny and Zooey*] might have written about herself later, if she had spent those ten years in Hell" (130) and praising the novel's sharp and uncanny descriptions as good examples of Shklovskian defamiliarization, "the most important technical device of realism" (132). Further, Scholes anticipated what would become a more general critical trend in the 1990s (in literary scholarship in general and in the treatment of *The Bell Jar* in particular): a sensitivity to the sociocultural effects of Cold War politics on formal and thematic aspects of the text.

This latter awareness is seen also in a 1973 review by Mason Harris, who wrote that "the 'distorted lens' of madness gives an authentic vision of a period which exalted the most oppressive ideal of reason and stability" (35), as well as in a 1976 essay by Frederick Buell, who saw Esther Greenwood's bell-jar isolation under particular pressure in "the

self-conscious, mutually inspecting, conformist America of the fifties [whose] demonic side is willful solipsism and its pride of self-causation, available in both failure and success" (143). Marjorie Perloff, writing in 1972 for *Contemporary Literature*, framed her reading in the psychoanalytical concepts of R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, presenting the protagonist/narrator's problem as primarily one of balancing her inner and outer selves. This angle, perhaps, led to the unfortunate labeling by Perloff of Esther as "schizoid," which is probably more reflective of the discourse of the 1970s than it is of Perloff's particular critical view, as we see it also in an otherwise favorable essay on *The Bell Jar* by Vance Bourjaily, who takes great care to provide textual support for his insistence that Esther, though sharing some major similarities with Plath, is not to be read as identical to Plath.

Howard Moss, reviewing the book for *The New Yorker*, gave a mixed review, recognizing the narrative's "sure sense of black comedy" while making the caveat at the end of the review that "something girlish in its manner betrays the hand of the amateur novelist" (129). Also ventured at the end of Moss's review was a critique echoed by reviewers Irving Howe, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, and Elizabeth Hardwick: that the novel fails to offer any real insight into the motives for suicide. Howe and Hardwick were ultimately dismissive of the contributions to be made by Plath's entire oeuvre, let alone *The Bell Jar*, insofar as her work, in their view, fails to provide any moral or existential meaning for the anger and nihilism it displays. In regard to *The Bell Jar*, critic Wendy Martin countered these hostile dismissals with a feminist meaning:

> Not since Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* has there been an American novel which so effectively depicts the life of an intelligent and sensitive woman eager to participate in the larger world, who approaches experience with what amounts to a deep hunger, only to discover that there is no place for her as a fully functioning being. (191)

Martin's response was not isolated, as critics, many of them feminist in approach, took up the cause of *The Bell Jar* as a novel that grabbed the two major concerns of second-wave feminist criticism by both horns: the portrayal of women in literature and the role of women writers in American culture. Work from the 1970s that contributed to an understanding of the novel in the light of these second-wave critical concerns includes Eileen Aird's *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work* and Caroline King Barnard Hall's *Sylvia Plath* (1978; revised in 1996 to reflect additional scholarship made possible by the release of Plath's *Collected Poems*). A short memoir by Nancy Hunter Steiner (1973), a close Smith College classmate of Plath's, provided anecdotal background on the years in which *The Bell Jar* is set, aiding critics in their work of sorting out invention from autobiography. Psychoanalytical responses did not rise up as rapidly in the 1970s in relation to Plath's fiction as they did in relation to the poems. The groundswell—of both psychoanalytical and feminist responses to the novel—would peak in the 1980s.

Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Dominant Themes and Tropes

After emerging in the 1970s, the application of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical theory in literary criticism (most famously with Harold Bloom's 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*) proliferated in the 1980s, finding obvious grist for its mill in the content of *The Bell Jar.* Already, psychoanalytical studies of Plath's work had paved the way; Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* and David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* are two such studies that appeared in 1976. Subsequent to Bloom's signal work of the 1970s came three important books that identified the need for a feminist inflection in any critical approach, psychoanalytical or otherwise: Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan

Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), followed by the three volumes of *No Man's Land* (1987-94). Gilbert and Gubar actually recast Bloom's notion of the "anxiety of influence"—a Freudian understanding of the male author's Oedipal relationship to prior male authors—as the "schizophrenia of authorship" experienced by women authors who face a sense of deep division in trying to meet cultural expectations for femininity while also pursuing literary careers. As Sandra Gilbert has written, "Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* defines herself as a 'wicked'—that is, a wickedly ambitious—woman, a woman who wants to 'shoot off in all directions' herself instead of being the passive 'place the arrow shoots off from'" (216), referring to Esther's sense of apprehension about whether she fits the passive wifely role defined by Mrs. Willard, the mother of Esther's fiancé, Buddy. This notion of division, as well as the notion of doubling, was well attended to in *Bell Jar* criticism throughout the 1980s.

No single scholar did more to generate an understanding of Plath in that decade and the next than Linda Wagner-Martin. Her edited volume *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* appeared in 1984, on the heels of the posthumous publication of Plath's *Collected Poems*, which received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. In 1987, Wagner-Martin published a Plath biography, and in 1992, she published one of the few book-length studies of Plath's novel, *"The Bell Jar": A Novel of the Fifties*. In this latter work, most of the major critical themes prevalent in the 1980s are broached. These themes include the place of the novel in Anglo-American literary tradition; the relationship of the novel's form to its content as well as to its gender politics; the tone of its ending; and the tropes of division within the protagonist, of isolation from others, and of doubling among its characters. Keeping with initial concerns about the novel's literary value, Wagner-Martin considers its proper place among traditional novelistic subgenres, noting that it takes the conventional "women's" subgenres—namely, domestic and romance novels—as "objects of . . . satire" (20); *The Bell Jar*, Wagner-Martin concludes, is best understood as a "female bildungsroman," or coming-

of-age novel, but with a marked difference in arc from a bildungsroman with a male protagonist, owing to sociocultural limitations on female agency and actualization. By contrast, male characters in coming-of-age novels, such as Pip in *Great Expectations*, emerge at the ends of the novels with a sense of growth that readies them to deal with life as "whole" adult persons with viable choices by which to sound the depths of their authenticity. Anticipating "écriture feminine" approaches that would arise in the 1990s with the importation of French feminist theory into Anglo-American critical practice, Wagner-Martin asserts that the fragmented nature of *The Bell Jar*, with its associative and, at times, dissociative movements from present to past tense and back, mirrors in form the dissolution of the narrator/protagonist as she becomes aware of her limitations. While most critics have viewed the ending of the novel to be cautiously optimistic, citing the image of rebirth Plath uses as well as the fact, mentioned early in the novel, that the narrator is recalling her breakdown from a much later point in her life when she is "all right again" and married, with a baby (Plath 3), Wagner-Martin views the ending as ambivalent when discussing the novel as a bildungsroman; however, in later chapters of the study, she would seem to contradict this, as when she writes that "there is no question that Plath intended to create a thoroughly positive ending for Esther's narrative" (79).

We see this insistence on a happy ending in Caroline King Barnard Hall's 1970s analysis of the novel when she speaks of Esther's "new wholeness" at the end of the novel, whereas it is qualified in Lynda K. Bundtzen's analysis of the ending: "In spite of Esther's new confidence, her rebirth, there are many instabilities" (153). The brokenness of Esther's sense of identity is, for Wagner-Martin, conditioned by the either/or options available to young women in the 1950s, who often had to choose between the mutually exclusive options of career and marriage/motherhood; the isolation from others is embodied by the eponymous trope of the bell jar, which has, depending on context, "scientific or ominous" associations. Wagner-Martin devotes an

entire chapter to the "doubling" that is enacted in the novel, drawing on ideas in Steven Gould Axelrod's 1990 *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, in which Axelrod likens the doubling of Clarissa and Esther in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* to that of Esther and Joan Gilling in *The Bell Jar*. However, where many critics have interrogated the doubling of Esther and Joan in terms of sexuality, Wagner-Martin views Joan simply as a model of unattractive, overachieving femininity that Esther first regards as just another female rival, then as an aspect of herself that she needs to reject in order to recover.

A far more complex analysis of Joan Gilling as Esther's double can be found in Pat Macpherson's 1991 *Reflecting on "The Bell Jar,"* where the issue of homophobia in Plath's treatment of this character is explicitly foregrounded:

> In the gendered world of *The Bell Jar*, Esther's "purge" [of Joan, who commits suicide, to Esther's relative indifference, near the end of the novel] can be seen as a pragmatic "solution" to her numerous problems with womanhood, including matrophobia, the lesbian threat, the "big stick" of pregnancy, the even bigger stick of subordination and shaming of women in heterosexuality, and the limitations of being a literary woman in the world of literary men. (92)

Vance Bourjaily sees Joan as the novel's only true double for Esther's character, noting that, in a novel full of mirrors reflecting Esther's image back, distorted, the mirrors disappear entirely when Joan appears in the upscale mental hospital where Esther is being treated. In the course of arguing that one of the allegories treated in *The Bell Jar* is the "allegory of the double standard," Lynda Bundtzen asserts that "all of the female characters are doubles for Esther—possible roles she tries on and then discards, because they do not fit her self and because her sense of self is so fragmented" (117); she notes how Doreen and Betsy, two other *Ladies' Day* student guest editors, repre-

sent, respectively, "bad girl" and "nice girl" identities for Esther, who ultimately cuts herself off from both and who, later encountering Joan, "the most important double" in the novel, destroys her "as the diseased part of her mind which must be amputated in order for her to get well and to live successfully under the bell jar that encloses all women" (151). The attention to doubling is well grounded in Plath's own text, in which the narrator says, "Joan was the beaming double of my own best self, designed to follow and torment me" (167). Attention to doubles in *The Bell Jar* is further fueled by biographical information that Plath, as a college undergraduate, wrote a thesis on the role of doubles in the works of Fyodor Dostoevski, just as Esther looks ahead to her senior year plan to write about twins in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

By the 1990s, *The Bell Jar*'s place in Anglo-American literature as serious fiction was established, owing in part to the work of feminist critics seeking to resist the patriarchal literary establishment's tendency to dismiss women's writing, in part to the novel's clear sophistication of style despite its readability, and in part to Plath's place in the canon as a major American poet. As "confessional poetry" graduated from being a trend decried by purists as sensationalism to becoming an identifiable movement in American literary history, Plath's work distinguished itself beyond the label as crafted, layered, and as full of archetypes and objective correlatives as the work of T. S. Eliot. Whether or not *The Bell Jar*, Plath's "potboiler," piggybacks undeservedly on the merit of the poetry may never be adequately determined, despite the verdict made by Ted Hughes and others, such as Rosellen Brown, who wrote that, "for Plath, most of the time, fiction served the world's purposes and poetry served the self's" (116). In many ways, the 1990s move toward poststructuralism and cultural studies in Anglo-American criticism made the point moot, as these frameworks question the very distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, between text and context, and between disciplines.

Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and *The Bell Jar* as Artifact

Terry Eagleton, in a survey of how the field of literary criticism has changed over time, roots his discussion in the ever-morphing definition of what "literature" is. Elaborating on John M. Ellis's analogy that the term "literature" is as variable as the term "weed," Eagleton writes: "As the philosophers might say, 'literature' and 'weed' are *functional* rather than *ontological* terms: they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things" (9). So what is it that critics *do* with *The Bell Jar* in the poststructural climate of the 1990s and the young twenty-first century?

One dominant approach is meta-analysis. Rather than to decree, or accept an existing decree, that *The Bell Jar* is worthy of attention and then dive into a close reading for themes, symbols, and stylistic features (though these features are not entirely ignored), more recent critics step back from the text to see it in relation to other texts, other discourses, and competing narratives about literary, cultural, and geopolitical history. How writing gets produced as literature, and the material factors that go into that production, are important objects of consideration.

For instance, Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, first published in 1991, engages in a reading of Plath's work that is aware of issues related to her estate, the access critics have to Plath's three archives, and the various cultural representations of Plath as an author. Where Elizabeth Hardwick, writing in the 1970s, warily urged that readers distinguish between Plath as a writer and Plath as an "event" (101), more recent critics have worked to deconstruct and understand that "eventhood" as having something important to say to us about our culture. Janet Badia, in an essay on *The Bell Jar* for the 2006 *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, traces recent pop-cultural allusions to the novel (from the teen film *10 Things I Hate About You* to the animated series *Family Guy*) as a backdrop for her claim that the debate over *The Bell Jar*'s literary value stems from a dismissive attitude to-

ward its potential readers, particularly toward young women; while, in its early decades in print, the novel's value was suspect on the basis of its being viewed as a "potboiler" written by a relatively untried novelist, more recent censure of the novel has to do with fears that impressionable young readers might come to romanticize depression and suicide.

Elisabeth Bronfen's 1998 book-length study of Plath, while dealing only obliquely with the text of *The Bell Jar*, speculates that the Plath estate's release of her work over time reflects an effort to control the narrative of the poet's life and death. For example, Bronfen notes that the 1975 release of *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, a collection of letters written by Sylvia Plath, selected and edited by Aurelia Plath, the author's mother, may be seen as Aurelia Plath's "response" to what she saw as the negative version of her daughter (and of herself) the quasi-autobiographical novel put forth. In *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001), Tracy Brain ostensibly resists the especially recalcitrant Plath "myth," propounded first by Hughes and echoed by a majority of critics through the 1980s, that everything Plath wrote—*The Bell Jar* included—was merely practice for the genuine specimen of genius that is *Ariel*. Thus, in her chapter on *The Bell Jar*, Brain expands on Axelrod's intertextual work connecting *The Bell Jar* to a "parent text" in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* by noting possible influences of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* on the text of Plath's novel. The possible influence of this latter work by Woolf, as a feminist writer's manifesto, complicates the assumption by several critics, including the earliest work on Plath by Marjorie Perloff, that the author would not have seen herself as a feminist. Brain further shows the extent to which Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* may have served as a more remote, nineteenth-century, model for *The Bell Jar.* Pamela Cooper has highlighted more recent intertextual connections in "'A Body Story with a Vengeance': Anatomy and Struggle in *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale*," though she is careful to acknowledge that there was no conscious modeling of or indebtedness to Plath's novel on the part of *Handmaid's*

Tale author Margaret Atwood, who has published several essays on Plath's contributions as a woman author.

Intertextual connections within the author's own prose corpus were made as early as 1984, by Melody Zajdel. Profiting from the 1979 U.S. publication of Plath's shorter prose fiction in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts* (edited by Ted Hughes), Zajdel identifies earlier elaborations of scenes from *The Bell Jar* in three short stories published after Plath's death ("Tongues of Stone," "Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men," and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"), as well as in a story published in a Smith College review in 1954. According to Zajdel, the development of these scenes over a long period of time reflects Plath's long-standing concern with major themes in *The Bell Jar*: the challenge of sustaining a life of the imagination despite cultural constraints and the sexual politics that further complicate this challenge. And Robin Peel's extensive work with Plath archives has shown that, far from being a "potboiler" rapidly tossed off, *The Bell Jar* manuscript was substantially revised, redrafted, and cropped by Plath.

According to Deborah Nelson, who has written extensively on *The Bell Jar*'s place as a textual product of Cold War America, Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, in exploring "the implication of psyche in history, and history in psyche" (Rose 7), was a "powerful revision" that opened the way to "an increasing number of critical works [that] began to read Plath's prose and poetry historically, exploring her engagement with mass media like advertising and women's magazines" and that "direct[ed] analysis towards history [to] reveal Plath's art as actively engaged in a critique of American Cold War culture and its gender ideology" (Nelson 24). Indeed, Nelson's own observations about *The Bell Jar*'s historical frame, the execution of the Rosenbergs on espionage charges, reflect the larger recent tendency to see the novel's opening sentence as a clear invitation to read the novel in interdisciplinary ways, bringing history, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism together to map the novel's extension beyond the covers of the book:

"It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (Plath 1). The reference not only dates the novel's setting as the summer of 1953, but it also establishes a parallel between Esther Greenwood and Julius and Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg, all of whom are "treated" with electricity that summer (Esther receives a botched electroshock therapy treatment in the second half of the novel and remarks, "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done"); this parallel offended some early critics, on grounds similar to those held by critics who objected to Plath's use of the Holocaust to express personal angst in poems such as "Daddy."

More recent criticism, however, guided by feminism's commonplace that "the personal is political," has embraced the connection between private and public, as does Macpherson's book-length *Reflecting on "The Bell Jar"* (1991), which examines the Cold War era's shaping of gender identity and sexuality through the novel's depiction of the summer of 1953 and its aftermath. Robin Peel's *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (2002) shows the interface of geopolitics and literature not only in the novel but also in Plath's poetry. In a more recent essay, Kate A. Baldwin (in a 2004 essay reprinted in this volume) focuses on the role of two "Others" in *The Bell Jar*—Constantin, the Russian United Nations interpreter who goes on a date with Esther, and the unnamed "Negro" kitchen worker whom Esther kicks while she is a psychiatric inpatient—in order to suggest that the "radical imaginary" at work in the novel reveals even more than Plath may have intended about "American women's relationship to national narratives that place, displace, and replace women in an international, geo-political world order [as much as it reveals] the relationship between U.S. domestic incarceration and the asylum" (23).

Issues of political power—on personal, interpersonal, national, and transnational levels—come to the foreground of literary study drawing on poststructural and psychoanalytical theory. For instance, Michel Foucault's notion of "countermemory," or the physical and material

memories that contradict dominant or official accounts of history, is central to the approach of Jeffrey Howlett, who concludes in a 1999 essay that "Plath's narrator launches a counter-narrative that reveals the brutal fact of sociopolitical conformity and male dominance beneath the apparently 'natural' and 'normal' organization of male-female power relations in 1950s America" (48). Garry M. Leonard (in a 1992 essay reprinted in this volume) reviews the discourse of women's magazines of the 1950s to demonstrate how femininity was both packaged and psychologically internalized by women like Esther Greenwood. Another economic/consumption studies approach is seen in Marsha Bryant's 2002 "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising" (reprinted in this volume). In a 2004 essay, Marilyn Boyer employs a range of Lacanian psychoanalytical and French-feminist theory, and, most notably, brings the emerging discipline of disability studies to bear on a reading of *The Bell Jar* in which the fragmentation of the young female body parallels the fragmentation of the young female writer's voice, a thesis raised in 1987 by E. Miller Budick in an article titled "The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" (reprinted in this volume). As psychoanalytical approaches complicate the more two-dimensional Freudian-Jungian applications of the 1970s and 1980s, work such as Diane S. Bonds's "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" (1990) draw on the object-relations psychological theories of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan to shift completely the way in which Esther's "recovery" is read, since, as Bonds notes, "critics for the most part seem to have brought to the novel the same assumptions about the self which inform Plath's book, assumptions deriving from a separative model of the self" (50).

Conclusion

While it is unlikely that *The Bell Jar* will ever be placed on the same shelf of value as Plath's poetry, it is nonetheless true that many nonacademic readers find that the novel speaks to them in powerful

ways, whether or not they have read Plath's verse. This fact holds even as critical approaches change over time. The book may never make any "Greatest Novels of All Time" lists, and Plath may never be placed in any pantheon of Anglo-American novelists, but *The Bell Jar* is as integral a part of her body of work as a limb is to a human body. Whether it is viewed as a female bildungsroman, a feminist artifact, or a satire on a cultural moment, it generates meaningful critical insights within and beyond its paperback, "potboiler" covers.

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Sentient Patterning in *The Bell Jar*

Pamela St. Clair

Sylvia Plath lived to write and wrote to live. Her dedication to art, her drawing and writing, is well documented in her journals, letters, and scrapbooks dating back to her early childhood. Like many writers, Plath felt incomplete if she was not writing: "Only I've got to write. I feel sick, this week, of having written nothing lately" (*Journals* 269). Plath wrote herself into existence. If she could not write, she could not *be*. She wrote to entertain and to communicate, but more essentially, to capture and make tangible her experience. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath makes tangible the depression that in 1953 culminated in her attempted suicide. Drawn from personal experience, Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist, is a self-portrait imbued with Plath's creative doubts and aspirations. Plath's conscientious self-reflexivity invites a reading of Esther as a draft in progress and her downward spiral and upward quest for self-definition as a symbolic journey of Plath's creative process, her "joining & moving in patterns" (*Journals* 327).

Plath consistently patterned her drafts on paper recycled from her manuscripts and, when married, from those belonging to her husband, Ted Hughes. As archival drafts reveal, Plath often experimented with various poem and book titles and continuously shuffled poems around, reconfiguring and reconsidering the relationships between title and text and among poems. Although no archive is complete, as Tracy Brain warns in her careful reading of the restored version of *Ariel*, draft versions provide some insight into Plath's editing, more often elisions than additions, and her ordering process. Plath's habit of drafting on the backs of transcript pages invites a reading of her texts as a fluid, extended conversation. Challenging the accepted chronology of the poems, Robin Peel examines two edited manuscripts of *The Bell Jar* on whose reverse pages many of the *Ariel* poems, including "Elm," are drafted. Esther's contemplation of the horror of the electric chair, of "being burned alive all along your nerves" (1) is echoed in the "red fil-

aments" of "Elm" that "burn and stand, a hand of wires" (*Collected Poems* 192). Whether a measure of economy or a deliberate means of extending the creative dialogue, Plath's process spins a web of intriguing connections among her many texts.

The writer's block that often plagued Plath made her well aware of the stubborn, fickle nature of inspiration, that indeterminate "something else" hauling the "Ariel" speaker "through air" (*Collected Poems* 239). Usually, Plath crafted slowly. Hughes recalls her "consulting her Thesaurus and Dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow, strong line of ink under each word that attracted her" (*Winter Pollen* 161). Even Plath refers to herself as "Roget's strumpet" (*Journals* 212). Many of the *Ariel* poems, however, were written in an unusual frenzy in the fall of 1962. By the end of October, Plath had written twenty-seven poems, many responsible for earning *Ariel* its fame. Heather Clark reads the title poem as a striking enactment of the untouchable spark of inspiration, the "brown arc" eluding capture and lighting the "blue/ Pour and tor of distances" of the mind (*Collected Poems* 239). The poem redirects the arrow that Mrs. Willard, Esther's boyfriend's mother in *The Bell Jar*, claims rockets from the base a woman secures for a man. In "Ariel," it drives, instead, the female imagination. Writing about the interplay between Plath's art and writing, Kathleen Connors notes how Plath would often return to her previous work not only to spark ideas but also to "look into her past, and assess her creative progress (6). Hence the dialectical exchange between back-to-back novel and poem drafts enriches a reading of the novel as a journey through the labyrinths of an imagination alert to its own imagining. Although Plath wrote "Ariel" at the same time she was editing *The Bell Jar*, it is not one of the poems drafted on the reverse of any of the novel's edited manuscripts. It is one of the few *Ariel* poems that does not disclose a relationship between itself and any preceding, informing text (Brain 20). Metaphorically and literally, this rich evocation of process begins as a fresh start on its own page, as if it burst, unprovoked, through the "[s]tasis in darkness" (*Collected Poems* 239).

Plath was keenly interested in the psychology of the self, elusive as the muse, as manifest in the literary double. At Smith, she wrote her senior thesis on the dual personalities in Dostoevski's fiction. She notes how this psychic split reflects "man's eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity" (*Magic Mirror* 1). Not surprisingly, Plath employed this literary device in her poetry and prose. Connors traces how Plath re-creates the "psychic doubles" of Virginia Woolf's characters in her poems "Words," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel" by borrowing the "dramatic imagery" from Woolf's novels (121). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther confronts a number of doubles. She is initially attracted to the experienced, flashy Doreen but then feels more akin to the innocent, "Pollyanna Cowgirl" Betsy (7). Esther has difficulty reconciling her different impulses and wading through the cultural expectations intent on limiting her choices. She can be a serious virginal girl like Betsy or a fun-loving, sexual girl like Doreen. She cannot be both. She can be a professional woman like Jay Cee, the respected editor for whom she works in New York, or a mother like her neighbor, the birdlike Dodo Conway, who walks with "her head tilted happily back, like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg" (137).

Neither model, urban or suburban, satisfies because neither encompasses Esther's numerous goals and desires. Jay Cee is masculine, her choice—career—requiring the sacrifice of her feminine self. Even her abbreviated name, a homonym of initials, sounds masculine, like the pseudonyms women writers—George Eliot, J. K. Rowling—have adopted across the centuries to mask their gender. With her brood of children, and a seventh on the way, Dodo Conway is the fertile opposite of Jay Cee. Her eponymous name suggests silliness rather than intellect. The dodo was a wingless bird incapable of flight. Esther fears that motherhood will not offer an arrow of creative opportunity. Dodo is the manifestation of Plath's worries that she will "lose it in cooking scrambled eggs for a man . . . hearing about life at second hand, feeding my body and letting my powers of perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic" (*Journals* 88). This tension between a

writing career and motherhood would continue to haunt Plath, who wanted to have it all, the "Books & Babies & Beef stews" without "falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter" (*Journals* 269). She struggled to find role models. At first enchanted with Virginia Woolf—"Her novels make mine possible"—she later disparaged Woolf for creating "dull old women who have never spilt blood" (*Journals* 494). Plath gives Esther plenty of female role models for one type of bottled life or another, but none who successfully balances the seemingly diametrically opposed demands of domestic and professional creativity. Yet Esther's story suggests they can be balanced, as she narrates looking back from the perspective of motherhood.

In New York, Esther finds no joy in her writing. When she returns home, she cannot write at all. Her initial electroshock therapy treatment jolts her further into depression. She becomes, literally, a belle jarred. She feels dead inside, blank as an unwritten page. At the private hospital where she will convalesce, Esther confronts another double, Joan. A college classmate, Joan is the "beaming double" of Esther's "old best self" (246). Joan interests Esther despite Esther's "old, ingrained dislike," but Esther views Joan as a rival and an unwelcome reminder of the past, her scholarly and creative undertakings that culminated in her breakdown (261). Even the topic of conversation that Joan has with her psychiatrist arouses Esther's envy: "I never talked about Egos and Ids with Doctor Nolan. I didn't know just what I talked about really" (267).

Esther's envy escalates with Joan's next declaration that she will be living outside the hospital. Esther exhibits Plath's competitive spirit, as evidenced in her frequent comparison of herself to contemporary writers such as Anne Sexton, whose poems Plath extolled in a BBC interview with Peter Orr as "wonderfully craftsman-like," with "a kind of emotional and psychological depth," and Adrienne Rich and Donald Hall, both "so dull, and they putting in a hundred pages of dull published poems, I wouldn't feel so lousy" (*Journals* 295). Joan reminds Esther of past failures just as Plath's poet "rivals" kindled her doubts.

Without her writing, Esther can no longer write herself into existence. This porous separation between written and textual body appears in Plath's journals, when she writes, for example, of "feeling colors, rhythms, words" contributing to her identity "forming itself" (327). It manifests as a literal and metaphorical fusing in Plath's drafts of her poem "Burning the Letters." As a response to Hughes's "The Thought-Fox," the text talks back to Hughes, as the body, the ink, bleeds through, 'dyeing' [Hughes's fox] with her fox's agony, spilling onto his page and sullying its silent beauty" (Bundtzen 243).

Esther's rejection from a summer writing class confirms her fears of failure and fuels her suicidal desire. In Plath's journal, the incident is recorded in one sentence wedged between a paragraph questioning her abilities and another admonishing herself to "learn shorthand, typing," the motherly advice Esther will refuse. The uncharacteristic capitalization lends a heavy air of finality to the disappointment Plath will assign to Esther: "I AM NOT GOING TO HARVARD SUMMER SCHOOL" (546). When she attempts to drown herself, she hears her heart pounding, "I am I am I am" (188). Without punctuation, those short declarations bleed into one another, as self-definition continues to elude Esther. If Esther cannot create a textual body, she must rid herself of her physical body. Even her voice is disembodied when she calls to cancel an arrangement for an alternative class at summer school. Referring to herself in the third person, Esther distances herself from the "zombie voice" relaying the message that "Miss Esther Greenwood was canceling all arrangements to come to summer school" (141). Plath confides in her journal, "The dialogue between my Writing and my Life is always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing: in other words: I justified the mess I made of life by saying I'd give it order, form, beauty, writing about it; I justified my writing by saying it would be published, give me life (and prestige to life)" (208-9). Esther is shaped by this Ars Poetica. If she cannot write, she cannot be.

If the literary double examines the split self created on the page, it

also extends beyond the margins to examine the duality within the writer, that inner exchange seeking to understand the enigmatic self. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, a collection of essays about the writing process, Margaret Atwood considers the inherent duplicity in writers: "And who is the writing 'I'? A hand must hold the pen or hit the keys, but who is in control of that hand at the moment of writing? Which half of the equation, if either, may be said to be authentic?" (45). Originally, the publishing "I" and the written "I" of *The Bell Jar* were the same, as Plath's early choice for her heroine's name was Victoria, the pseudonym under which she chose to publish the novel. Esther's various failures to distinguish or recognize herself attest, metaphorically, to this sense of a permeable boundary between the writing and the written self. Leaving New York for home, she says of her reflection, "The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian" (133). In the hospital after her rescue from the crawl space, she interprets her bruised face as a foreign picture (208). When writing fails to define Esther, her selfhood recedes. She fades into the background in Lenny's apartment, "shrinking to a small black dot" until she feels "like a hole in the ground" (20). The novel suggests that the authentic self beneath the enigma—that "old best self" (246)—can surface only if one half of the equation is erased.

Hence, Joan must die. Hughes writes of Plath's preoccupation with this "mythic schema of violent initiation, in which the old self dies and the new self is born" and which is "fundamental to the major works of Lawrence and Dostoyevski," writers Plath admired ("On Sylvia Plath"). Rebirth is, of course, a consistent theme throughout Plath's oeuvre. Writing is the birthing, or rebirthing, process. One self must be shed, like the "moults of style" that Plath discarded, according to Hughes, each time they relocated, a change in scenery effecting a change in voice (Introduction, *Collected Poems* 16). At Joan's funeral, Esther is finally able to reclaim her voice. The scene is delineated in black and white, colors suggestive of text and page. Joan now inhabits that "hole in the ground" in which Esther envisioned herself over the

summer (20). Joan's grave is the "shadow" that will "marry" Esther's shadow (289). Where Joan's coffin is buried, a yellow soil will "seal the wound in the whiteness," as wax seals paper (289). With its wound, the paper is made flesh, marrying the body of text and self. Now Esther can take "a deep breath" and hear her heart beating, "I am, I am, I am" (289). Whereas the declarations previously overlapped, here commas separate them. Less of a blurred enigma, Esther is more clearly defined.

As Plath writes in "Ocean 1212-W," her autobiographical essay linking her early sense of identity with a burgeoning sense of language, "Breath, that is the first thing" (*Johnny Panic* 117). The breath of language is the poet's oxygen. Breath precedes and prepares for speech. Reworked and revised, Esther is not quite a polished draft by the novel's end, but a working draft, tentatively embracing a new sense of self-awareness. Preparing to leave the hospital, she is on the brink of announcing a self, "patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (290). At her departing interview, she guides herself into the room, tugged "by a magical thread" (290). As if touched by the muse's mysterious magic, she is ready once again to write herself into being.

Plath's interest in the literary double and its psychological implications corresponds with her own creative self-reflexivity, a diligent attention to the machinations of the imagination evident even in childhood. In separate letters written to her mother and father when she was seven, Plath comments on form, the short length of each, and style, her color choices. To her mother she writes, "The only colors I may use are, yellow, purple, orange red blue. The light that is glass is rainbow colors!" (qtd. in Connors 7). Plath analyzes her rhetorical choices, "the point of view of vowel and consonant shades, values, coolnesses, warmths, assonances and dissonances. . . . But I do want to explain why I use words, each one chosen for a reason, perhaps not as yet the very best word for my purpose, but nevertheless, selected after much deliberation" (*Journals* 88). This attention to process surfaces in her

drawing, too. A number of her formal sketches and notebook doodles include M. C. Escher-esque drawings of one hand drawing another or of her own hand in the process of drawing (Connors 22, 103).

The Bell Jar enacts a similar mirroring act. It presents Esther, a fictionalized self-portrait of Plath, trying to write a novel about a fictionalized self-portrait named Elaine. Esther thinks, "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise" (142). Plath disparaged the types of writing that are just "cries from the heart informed by nothing except a needle or a knife. . . . I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience" (Interview). The novel Elaine abandons is a shut-box, the kind Plath struggled to circumvent. Hughes calls Plath's hermetic dance between her attention to process and art "the weird autonomy" of what was going on in Plath's "symbolic inner theater" (*Winter Pollen* 180). Plath continued to explain how writing should be germane to "the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Interview). Plath situates Esther's bildungsroman within the framework of the times, the Rosenberg trial, but Esther cannot envision Elaine outside her own bell jar of being. The question of what fuels the imagination, what makes experience transcendent, fueled Plath's art.

It also suffocated her art. Hughes notes how Plath's journal is rather unusual for its absence of daily events or adventures, suggesting that her "inner process seemed to engross all her attention" and, correspondingly, that it inhibited her poetry and prose, each subject to the process as "to a tyrant" (*Winter Pollen* 18). Plath often bemoaned the bouts of writer's block she suffered, that "fury of frustration, some inhibition keeping me from writing what I really feel," and yearned for the experience that would help her to envision the writing landscape outside herself (*Journals* 469). In Hughes's introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, he shares how Plath would turn to drawing to try to free herself by "laboriously delineating" an "intricate pile of things," but, he notes, the "limitation to actual circumstances" was "the prison of so much of her prose" (12).

Beginning with its title and opening contemplation of the Rosenbergs' impending electrocution, *The Bell Jar* is replete with signature images of writer's block, suffocation, and deadened sensory experiences. As Esther acknowledges after her recovery, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (282). If writing makes life real, its absence makes it surreal. Esther views her past achievements as empty and meaningless when reflected in the "slick marble and plate-glass fronts" of the city (2). Plath ascribes similar language to her poems that dissatisfy because of their lack of psychological depth. She resents their "slick shiny artificial look" (*Journals* 293). Esther's experience in the city undermines her years of studying and writing. She is disillusioned to find that all of her hard work to win the magazine internship has merely positioned her as a commercial pawn. She notes how the copious gifts the magazine bestows are "as good as free advertising" (4). She and the other interns—there are, notably, twelve—have become apostles for the magazine, spreading not literature but advertising gospel. The serious literature and ambitions Esther has pursued evaporate. Hughes writes how Plath's "intense ambition to write a novel" was "one of the main and most distressful themes of her early journals. Her inability to start—or worse—her various attempts to start brought her repeatedly to near despair" ("On Sylvia Plath"). Plath injects Esther with this despair. When Esther attempts to write a novel, she attributes to her doppelgänger Elaine a stifling "inertia" that "oozed like molasses" (143). The belabored pace with which Esther writes reflects the deliberation that slowed Plath's writing. Esther's unsuccessful attempts to kill herself read like her aborted stabs at writing. Despite her concentrated will, all of her approaches—drowning, bleeding, hanging, and eventually overdosing—fail to script her end.

Plath turned to a number of outside agencies to enervate the writing inertia. One was art. After a long dry spell while teaching at Smith, Plath writes ecstatically of her breakthrough with ekphrastic poems:

> I have written two poems on paintings by de Chirico which seize my imagination—"The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles" (after his early painting, "The Enigma of the Oracle") and two on paintings by Rousseau—a green & moony-moody-piece, "Snakecharmer," & my last poem of the eight, as I've said, a sestina on yadwigha of "The Dream." (*Journals* 359)

Whereas removing herself to draw, replicating faithfully without the pressure to philosophize, may ultimately have been an obstacle to her writing, as Hughes posits, inserting herself into a painting, borrowing its story, removed her from her own shackles. She became both Ariel and Prospero, releasing herself from the pine prison. She also turned to Hughes for writing prompts. *"No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry*, a catalog of items from the Plath and Hughes archive on exhibit at the Grolier Club in 2005, reprints a list of topic ideas that Hughes, as was his habit, would suggest to Plath when she was blocked. Visible are Plath's bullets beside the subjects that interested her—"Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" and "Stones"—and which she would successfully transform into poems (36). Her journal, too, was a sketch pad for limning characters and scenes for future writing endeavors. A Devon neighbor's daughter is described in language recalling Esther's observations of the horselike Joan: "Betty a handsome, lean, hard-faced girl with black short hair, a racing-horse body, a sharp nose & chin" (667). Another character sketch records Plath's blunt thoughts about Dorothy Wrinch, "a gray-haired idiot, goggling, going through her little-grey-haired-misunderstood-genius-scientist-act," who "obviously was miffed I said I'd call her for coffee and never did: but I won't, either. I don't care a damn for her & won't waste poem-time on people I can't stand" (356). Engaged in that constant dialogue between her writing and her life, Plath allowed things or people to take up space only if they would serve both.

Regardless of how Plath stumbled upon a topic, she would, like any serious writer, apprentice herself to others, trying on other voices to

hone her own style. She began in childhood, mimicking the colors and language of children's books (Connors 4). Plath spoke with enthusiasm about some of her modernist influences. In her 1962 interview with Peter Orr, she listed Dylan Thomas, William Butler Yeats, and W. H. Auden, and then added, "I was absolutely wild for Auden and everything I wrote was desperately Audenesque." Plath's writing was also shaped by an ongoing dialogue with Hughes. Upon meeting him, Plath wrote "Ode for Ted" and "inaugurated a practice of coding responses to his work in her own work-in-progress" (Middlebrook 260). The poem, ending on the word "blood," idealizes what Diane Middlebrook notes Plath later will target, Hughes's predatory expertise with wildlife (260). That after Plath's death Hughes continued the dialogue the couple practiced, notably in his collection *Birthday Letters*, emphasizes the extent to which their writing relied on responses to each other's work. Heather Clark adds "Ariel" to the list of poems written in coded response to Hughes's "The Thought-Fox." Both poems are figurative explorations of the source of inspiration, and both allude to the myth of Phaethon, which "touches on ideas of authority, legitimacy, rebellion, and hubris" (Clark 105).

Authority and legitimacy surface in the poem "Daddy," the lineage of which Heather Cam traces back to Anne Sexton's "My Friend, My Friend." Plath was introduced to Sexton's work in a Robert Lowell workshop both poets attended in Boston. Cam compares the similar rhyme scheme and imagery linking the two poems. Linking Virginia Woolf to Plath's prose, in addition to her poems, is the theme of the fractured self. Plath noted passages in Woolf's novels of identities seeking definition. In her copy of *Jacob's Room* she underlined "He was lost" (8), and in *Mrs. Dalloway* she underlined "She knew nothing; . . . she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" (11). Next to this passage, one of Plath's few marginal notes—"problem: identity: unfixed"—echoes the anxiety she voiced in her journal—"I must not be selfless: develop a sense of self." Esther speaks of this same unease when she confides, "I wasn't steering

anything, not even myself" (3). Without her writing, Esther is rudderless.

When Plath mines Hughes's poems for material, Clark notes, in the process Plath is "distorting both his voice and images to fashion her own art" (102). Through fashion, Esther figuratively borrows others' voices. Wearing Betsy's clothes, she sees a distorted "wan reflection" of herself (133). The night before she is to leave the city, Esther tosses her wardrobe out the window. Anthropomorphized, her clothing is charged with selfhood. She pulls at the "pale tail" and it "slumped into her hand" (131). It is early, the "vague hour between dark and dawn" (131). This is the time of day in which Plath feverishly wrote her *Ariel* poems. For Esther, however, the "[s]tasis in darkness" is devoid of inspiration (*Collected Poems* 239). Her clothes float off like a "loved one's ashes," like the smoke of nurtured dreams leaving a trail of burnt embers (232). Dressed in Betsy's skirt and blouse, Esther refers to herself by the nickname conferred upon Betsy, "Pollyanna Cowgirl." She says this out loud as if to test her new "voice" (133).

As Esther falls further into depression, she does not wash her hair or change her clothes, which give off an animal-like odor, a "sour but friendly smell," as if she has become prey to a lack of imagination rather than a predator of inspiration (151). At the private hospital, she will refuse to recognize a photograph of herself snapped in New York, referring to her image in the third person: "The girl was holding a glass full of transparent drink and seemed to have her eyes fixed over my shoulder on something that stood behind me, a little to my left" (249). She describes the dress the girl is wearing as "fuzzy white stuff," recalling the look of Doreen's "strapless white lace dress" the night she and Esther escaped to Lenny's apartment (249, 8). Esther's eagerness to reject unsatisfying versions of herself reflects Plath's desire to leave the old voice of an unsatisfying manuscript behind and move forward in a new voice: "The main thing is to get rid of the idea that what I write now is for the old book. That soggy book. So I have three poems for the new, temporarily called *The Colossus and Other Poems*" (*Journals* 518).

Plath desired of her poems that they be free from the "bear-traps of logical development" and aim for words with "an aura of mystic power: of Naming the name of a quality: spindly, prickling, sleek, splayed, wan, luminous, bellied" (*Journals* 285). Like her admired Yeats, Plath sought out a "mystic power" to free up her inner voice by calling on the spirit voices a Ouija board conjures. Esther distances herself from her own image when writing fails to define her. A similar distancing occurs when authority is transferred from writer to muse, for the Ouija board offered yet another medium for contemplating process, "the nature, the sources, and ultimately the limitations of poetic language" (Sword 555). Discussing the genesis of her poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree," Plath speaks as if the tree is the agent conceiving the poem, as it "began with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair. . . . It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it—everything! I couldn't subdue it" (*Collected Poems* 292). The tree functions like a Ouija spirit, as a means of relinquishing control to an agency of inspiration. As Plath's poem "Ouija" suggests, the conjured spirit, however, was incoherent, not offering any "succinct Gabriel from the letters" (*Collected Poems* 78). The muse offered little more than the "alphabet soup of letters" Esther sees while reading *Finnegans Wake* after abandoning her attempts at novel writing.

Esther becomes fixated on numbers. That the names Elaine and Esther both have six letters becomes a favorable omen: "It seemed a lucky thing" (142). Perhaps luck, like a Ouija spirit, will release Esther. The counting also reflects Plath's attention to cataloging. At age eleven she was signing and dating her drawings, as well as differentiating between those she traced and those she copied (Connors12). Plath was methodical about dating her own work and keeping household and publication records. When Esther counts one hundred letters in the alphabet soup on the page, she remarks, "I thought this must be important" (147). The mysteries, however, are not methodical. They will not

reveal themselves. Instead, the Joyce text begins to breathe, growing "barbs and rams' horns" (147). It acquires the spirited agency of the yew tree with the gobbledygoo of the Ouija spirit. And with that, Esther decides to discard her thesis. Now, Esther can neither write nor read. When the disembodied zombie from the phone returns to explain all this to the doctor and family friend Teresa, it chokes off her speech, too (149).

What Esther never loses is her sense of color. If the first page of each chapter is evidence, few, if any, are devoid of any descriptive or metaphorical use of color. Plath thought of herself as a painterly writer. In a BBC interview she remarked, "I have a visual imagination. For instance, my inspiration is painting and not music when I go to some other art form. I see these things very clearly" (qtd. in Connors107). At Smith, Plath initially studied both art and English until she decided to focus on her English curriculum when her art failed to garner the accolades her writing won. Writing and drawing were the twin arts competing for Plath's favors beginning in childhood, when she did not consider a poem complete unless it was accompanied by a drawing (Connors 4). The language of color is evident in the self-reflective analysis of her work. She notes her "heavy descriptive passages and a kaleidoscope of similes" (*Journals* 88). It surfaces in the reviews she published in the *New Statesman*; for example, Plath calls E. S. Bradburne's *Opal Whiteley* "pure Vermeer" ("Oregonian Original" 660). In her review of Hubert Cole's *Josephine*, Plath admires how the household scenes "are meticulous as a Dutch interior" and exuberantly gushes over the color palette, the "elaborations of etiquette finely render the compulsory stag hunts in the rain coats of green and gold or purple, blue, pink, lilac and silver according to the retinue and ponderous routine of Fountanbleau" ("Pair of Queens" 602-3).

The visual imagination that allowed Plath to see things clearly displays itself in her descriptive journal exercises that bring objects into focus with photographic similitude, such as in her description of a pinecone as seen from above: "To the left, several petals were missing,

so the next in the ruffle were a good deal larger and closer toward the base of the pine cone, while those on the right graded downward in a slow, regular increase of size after two frayed petals which showed a reddish yellow fiber where the gray woody surface peeled back" (612). And as Hughes notes, even this journal exercise continues the "biology of Ariel" waiting to be released (*Winter Pollen* 178). Color defines Esther's emotional landscape, from the "mirage-gray" and "granite canyons" of the city reflecting her flattened, trapped mood to her own tan fading, like her sense of self, to an "odd" complexion, "yellow as a Chinaman" (1, 9). The white of snow signals the purity and hope of a newborn self. Red was Plath's favorite color (Connors 114). Red is the color Esther chooses to wear to the exit interview that will release her from the private hospital. Her dress is as "flamboyant" as her plans (290). Esther is about to splash her mark on the page. She is the red "I" ready to walk into the "Ariel" cauldron of morning.

In her journal, Plath compares the process of writing the poem "Dialogue of a Ouija Board" to patching together a quilt, "without anything more than the general idea it should come out a rectangular shape, but not seeing how the logical varicolored pieces should fit" (111). Writing requires faith in the process. If that process is undermined or obstructed, the writing and, in Esther's case, the written self unravel. Esther embodies a self that is falling apart at the seams. Despite being "patched" in the end, Esther confides, "I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead—after all, I had been 'analyzed.' Instead, all I could see were question marks" (290). Her words mark a fitting end to a reading of the story as process, for what journey ever guarantees its destination?

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CRITICAL READINGS

"I have your head on my wall":*
Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America

Sally Bayley

> Russia and America circle each other; Threats nudge an act . . . bomb be matched against bomb[1]

The fact that the cultural milieu of suspicion and surveillance in 1950s America led a nation of citizens into bizarrely defensive positions has been well documented. The year that the American poet Sylvia Plath died—1963—is the year historian Richard Hofstadter wrote his essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. Hofstadter's definition of 'the paranoid style' is 'the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy' of the American political scene during the Cold War era, and he turns for his first example to none other than Senator Joseph McCarthy. Hofstadter's thesis turned upon what he described as 'points of contact with real problems of domestic and foreign policy and widespread and deeply rooted American ideas and impulses', all part of the Cold War Kulturkampf (Hofstadter 1963: 3, 4). The most apparent form of this culture was the rhetoric assumed by figures such as McCarthy whose words brewed up a tradition of verbal bludgeoning within American politics—as the American eye and ear became more accustomed to such performances. Thus, Nixon and Watergate followed suit, and a whole culture industry that fed off the searing performances of Cold War rhetoricians. In his study of mass communications, Marshall McLuhan points out that the media constructed natural winners and losers; TV, for Nixon's 'sharp intense image', heralded disaster, while for the 'blurry shaggy texture' of Kennedy, it could only mean good things (McLuhan 1964: 329, 330). 1963 was also the year that saw screened Emile de Antonio's McCarthyist documentary Point of Order!, a piece of film consisting entirely of unnarrated kinescopes that offered American audiences, a decade after

the fact, a Cold war monster movie (Doherty 2003: 246). It is the looming presence of this Cold war monster-rhetorician that resonates in the late work of the American poet Sylvia Plath, and that takes as its model the combative rhetoric of what Suzanne Clark has called 'Cold Warriors': a language whose origins are an earlier discourse of frontier manliness. Clark detects a sort of 'dream logic' to the Cold War rhetoric she discusses, a rhetoric that begins with 'the alliances and hostilities of nation-states', of East against West gathered around the international Communist movement. However, underlying this rhetoric is the implied presence of an implacable, overdetermined 'other' around which America was able to organize an entire foreign policy that claimed for itself the tools of reason and objectivity (Clark 2000: 23, 24). The defining moment for this policy was George F. Kennan's policy of containment outlined in his 1946 'long telegram', sent from Moscow to the State Department as a form of report on the state of affairs in Communist Russia (qtd. Clarke 2002: 24).[2] Alongside Kennan's telegram sits other pieces of significant Cold War rhetoric, including Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech, Truman's loyalty programme and the Marshall plan.[3] These are key moments of history, but as Martin Medhurst notes, since Thucydides, history and rhetoric have been in close alliance.[4]

Robert L. Scott has noted that the term 'Cold War' is in itself a rhetorical construction. As Scott clarifies, central to the term 'Cold War' is an oxymoronic ambivalence: 'Even the most vigorous of cold warriors . . . are ambivalent; that is, their words and actions have thus far stopped short, and stopping short is essential to the meaning of cold war'.[5] Rhetoric, as a form of persuasion, relies upon the sharp distinction between the real and the apparently real—an argument made clear by Plato in his dialogues, 'Gorgias' and 'Phaedrus'.[6] Reality, Plato argued, existed at the level of the archetype and was only accessible to human consciousness through dialectical inquiry that, through a process of systematic and logical eliminations, a final and certain conclusion of what constituted real knowledge could be met.[7] However, if, as

Robert L. Scott has suggested, rhetoric is a way of knowing, it does not simply make an already existing truth more persuasive; rather, rhetoric creates truths through the process of argumentation and debate—through the process of dialectic.[8]

It is the rhetoric of Joseph McCarthy that looms the loudest over the post-war period. As Thomas Doherty explains, McCarthy reigned over the era, 'propelled high on the atmosphere of external threat, internal insecurities and nuclear tremors', the 'great ogre of Cold War America, who as noun and adjective earned his dictionary entry as part of the language' (Doherty 2000: 13). That Plath was aware of the dominance of McCarthy and other 'cold war warriors' is apparent from her letters and journals. In an early 1950s journal entry, written from Smith College, she records what she predicts as the inevitably strong presence of male political figures within the future national consciousness: 'school children will sigh to learn the names of Truman and Senator McCarthy. Oh, it is hard for me to reconcile myself to this' (Kukil 2000: 32), and in a letter to her mother written in her final year at Smith (1955), she writes of her desire to 'counteract McCarthy and much adverse opinion about the United States' (Plath 1975: 163). Robin Peel has read the Plathean oeuvre through the backdrop of the Cold War and concludes rather cryptically that *The Bell Jar* and the *Ariel* collection are not 'about' the Cold War; but 'neither are they not about it' (Peel 2002: 227). That Plath also had a very strong sense of America's position in world events is quite clear from reading her journals and letters. In her 1962 essay 'Context' she declares that subjects such as the 'terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big American business and the military in America' do in fact influence the kind of poetry she writes, but 'in a sidelong fashion' (Plath 1977: 92). The same year, in an interview with Peter Orr, she confesses further to her interest in history: 'I am very interested in Napoleon, at the present . . . in battles, wars, in Gallipoli, the First World War and so on, and I think, that as I age I am becoming more and more historical' (Orr 1967: 169).

The Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 provide the most theatrical

and most apparent of examples of the rhetorical 'circus' played out across the nation. Thomas Doherty describes the televised 'miniseries' that constituted the hearings; at the centre of this miniseries was the face of the camera that 'panned Senate Caucus Room 318' (Doherty 2003: 195). The presence of the camera as another scrutinising 'I', is the subject of Plath's 1956 poem, 'Tale of a Tub'. Plath's poem tells the narrative of a suspect ego caught on camera, playing 'guilty' in the eye of its conscience, figured in the form of a witnessing 'stranger', or other self, 'the stranger in the lavatory mirror' (*CP* 24). Plath's poem is thus strongly reminiscent of the 'named' Communist suspect of McCarthy's campaign of mass indictment.

McCarthy's accusations that first exploded across the nation in his notorious 9th February, 1950 Wheeling West Virginia speech in which he named 205 members of the State Department as having associations with Communist organizations (Doherty 2002: 14). The Army hearings became the site of a fortunate sort of poetic justice for the Senate, a site where the rhetoric of one cold war warrior—the same rhetoric that had granted him so much notoriety—was now to undo him. The 'public grin' of Plath's witnessing 'stranger' serves as a metonym for the highly entertained public tuned into the Army hearings, reveling in the downfall of at least one source of their aggravated fear.

It is the purpose of this study to read the mature Plathean 'I' of *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* through the 'terrifying' and 'mad' cultural phenomenon of the 'paranoid style' of American cold war politics. Central to this politics is a rhetoric built upon defensiveness and aggression modelled upon the presiding cultural voices of Plath's formative years. The period from 1945 through to the 1960s has been identified by Alan Nadel as the first stage of the Cold War culture, during which the 'logic of containment' prevailed;[9] it is this period of American culture that informs Plath's late body of work. This essay offers a revisionist reading of Plath's late work in the light of the rhetoric of scrutiny and surveillance emanating from figures such as McCarthy, rhetoric she declared she would 'counteract' (Plath 1975: 163). It is typical of Plath

that she involved herself with the very language and processes she reviled—in order to debunk those same processes. Plath's mimetic involvement with the public rhetoric of cold war surveillance, her mock series of tribunals and investigations, becomes something quite different when moved into the realm of the private and the confessional. As I will argue, Plath's speakers are equipped with the rhetoric of those cold war warriors that constituted the political culture of her formative years—but relocated to the realm of the private and personal, the forum of the confessional poet, the rhetoric is significantly altered. This act of relocating a very public rhetoric into the most private of arenas—typically the family home—signifies a deliberately inauthentic performance of the private, via the medium of a public discourse. As McLuhan has famously declared, the medium is the message. This essay, then, will take further the work of scholars such as Robin Peel and Deborah Nelson who have read Plath within the context of Cold War America and Britain. This essay will discuss the rhetoric of Plath's late poems and prose as examples of a form of inverted cultural mimesis, bridging the gap between poetics and cultural context.

The American Citizen: Esther Greenwood

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963 but written during the late 1950s, is saturated with the language of Cold War America. It is a novel that explores the state of being Other to oneself, of self-disassociation and dislocation, as Plath herself was, living as an American in England. In this sense, the rhetoric of the Cold War serves the experience of Plath's narrator fittingly, and so she aptly marries the language of disease and ill-health to the language of nuclear destruction. Thus Esther's love interest, Buddy Willard, frames his experience as a sufferer of TB as 'living with a bomb in your lung' (Plath 1996: 84). Buddy's language echoes that of Klaus Theweleit, who associates the image of the bomb with a male ability to usurp the role of the female as mother-creator:

> He, who Has the power to destroy everything, HE, who is DEATH and LIFE in person, really can claim to have created HIMSELF. The makers of the bomb are the first men to have been really successful in bringing the oldest of male fantasies into material reality. (qtd. Clarke 2000: 25)

Interestingly, it is the image of babies that haunt Esther in her visit to the hospital where Buddy studies as a medical student. What concerns Esther is the excessive intrusion of male science into a realm she deems to belong to the female: 'For some reason the most important thing to me was actually seeing the baby come out of you yourself and making sure it was yours' (Plath 1996: 63). The language that Esther ascribes to here is that of the personal and the familiar/familial—a discourse clearly under threat from the defamiliarising processes of Buddy Willard's profession. Through the character of Esther Greenwood, then, Plath's novel reads as a series of self-disassociations, usually involving one institution or another in which disease or ill-health are figured and read back into the context of contemporary American culture. Typically, it is a culture that defamiliarizes and depersonalizes, a culture in which the protective boundaries of the private realm are persistently opened up to a direct encounter with the rhetoric of nation. Fragments of cultural and political reality float through Esther's narrative; thus, while browsing *Life* and *Time* magazines in the sanatorium where Buddy is a patient, the face of Eisenhower 'bald and blank, as the face of a foetus'[10] floats to the surface of Esther's narrative, an image that serves as a metonym for a national self lost in a state of Cold War, a nation in a state of ill-health. In another instance, Esther finds herself at the UN in the company of the Russian, Constantine, and his female interpreter, listening to idioms that leave her 'stranded in the middle of a huge silence': the silence of a self unable to assimilate anything non-American. The language of this scene is saturated in the encounter with foreignness—but it is a foreignness that is delivered through the apparatus of the rhetorician—through the 'labelled microphones' of the UN (Plath 1996: 71).

Thus, Esther is doubly displaced: not only by the foreignness of the language, but also by the means of its delivery—overtly public and highly staged. Esther sits and watches these foreign bodies with their mouths 'moving up and down without a sound', made both deaf and mute by the incomprehensible nature of their idioms (Plath 1996: 71).

Plath's novel, then, is constructed as a collage of private and public emblems in which one sphere threatens to out-manoeuvre the other; as a response to the 'huge silence' that frames her encounter with the Russians, Esther retreats into a process of self-evaluation based upon a series of cultural signs by which she can read herself as a young American female. First on the list is her ability to make scrambled eggs (Plath 1996: 71, 72). Thus, Esther's encounter with a non-American culture (and in terms of Cold War rhetoric, Russia, as a communist nation, is not only non-American but Enemy) leads Esther, as a young American citizen, into an assessment and consolidation of her personal identity. The rhetoric of the public and the private coalesce to form a particularly pernicious form of disorientation for the fragmenting Esther Greenwood whose sense of a private self becomes increasingly dependent upon her failing public self.

This collage of public and private is demonstrated in a 1960 collage assembled by Plath after her move to England, a collage created from magazines she received from her mother in the USA.[11] The collage depicts Eisenhower seated behind a desk, with a pack of cards in his hand, a large luminary presiding over a public;[12] his stance is that of the public statesman, addressing his nation/public. To the left of Eisenhower is a young female model, whose torso is intersected by the military arrows of a fighter jet. The caption beneath her reads, 'Every Man Wants His Woman On A Pedestal'. Much like Esther's process of self-evaluation, the young female model is framed in relation to a wider male, political discourse: the discourse of Eisenhower's military-industrial complex of the United States and its implied foreign targets.[13] As Suzanne Clark has noted, the rhetoric of the Cold War is

characterized by 'a phobic obsessive objectivity supported on a consensus subject'. Lurking behind this rhetoric, Clark argues, is a strong sense of a 'performance of defense' (Clark 2000: 26). It is this defensive tactic that Plath appears to imitate in her final body of poems, a defensive-aggressive stance that permits her to perform simultaneously both scrutinizer and scrutinized and thereby defy the strictures of either.

The Family Home and 'The Other'

At the heart of this thesis is Plath's 1962 poem, 'The Other' (*CP* 201-202), her most direct statement of accusation against a male traitor. 'The Other' takes as its setting the family home and turns it into a site of suspicion for the recalcitrant and guilty male who returns home 'late', 'wiping [his] lips' (*CP* 201). It is thus a poem of domestic betrayal and adultery—a wife accusing her adulterous husband of an affair with 'The Other', but it is also a poem deeply saturated in the language of the investigative agencies of the Cold War. As Deborah Nelson has explained in her study of Cold War privacy, 'the Cold War scripted the privacy crisis'. Nelson's investigation of the rhetoric of privacy is centered on the space of the family home where the language of privacy is delivered in the rhetoric of the autonomous middle-class home-owning citizen. The removal of privacy is a form of betrayal of a constitutional right, a betrayal of the Supreme Court's 'fashioning' of a right to privacy (Nelson 2003: xv). As Alan Nadel notes in his study of Cold War containment culture, betrayal in the public sense, in the form of the McCarthy witness, constitutes an act of prostitution. Nadel's critique is saturated in the language of sexual betrayal, as is Plath's poem: 'The McCarthy witness selling betrayal as a form of loyalty, must gain acceptability by suppressing the constitutional nature of the intercourse' (Nadel 1995: 181). Plath's speaker frames herself as the male investigator, barking his suspicions to the guilty-before-proven-otherwise male detainee: 'Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?' (*CP*

201). Plath's clever fusion of both male adulterer and female mistress figure places the guilt firmly at the feet of both—who together form a hybrid, fantasized 'Other'—an Enemy/Other whose presence constitutes a threat to the sacred privacy and autonomy of the American home.

Plath's speaker imitates the paranoiac position of the U.S. government to the Communist, reconfiguring the relation of self to self, wife to husband. The male figure in Plath's poem has been ousted from the domestic security of his home; now a subject of suspicion and interrogation, a subject on trial. In 'The Other', the home witnesses a dramatic betrayal of its former position and affiliations—the loyalty of wife to husband. The husband is ousted as a reliable informer of domestic affairs and is replaced by the voice of the speaker-wife. This first removal prepares us for the dramatic removal of the father figure from the seat of familial power in the later poem, 'Daddy'. The speaker of 'The Other' performs a form of ventriloquism in which the voice of the 'I' imitates its once male partner, now opponent/Enemy. 'The Other' also conjures up the rhetoric of Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy statements in relation to 'other' nations; Johnson's 20th April 1964 address clearly asserts the position of the American Self and her necessary freedom in relation to the freedom of 'others' (Medhurst & Brands 2002: 240). In this sense, Plath's speaker offers an imitation of antagonistic rhetoric of Soviet Premier Khrushchev in response to the American discourse of power: 'I have your head on my wall/ Naval cords, blue-red and lucent' (*CP* 202)—a line that also sharply echoes Khrushchev's riposte: 'We will bury you' (Fried 1998: 148). Tinged with the imagery of a dictatorship, these lines are suggestive of the loss of political freedom afforded to the individual by the anti-communist crusade. This inversion of the panoptic relationship between the subject of surveillance and the authorities of surveillance mirrors the illegal practices of the FBI under Hoover. In a memo to Director Hoover, Attorney General Herbert Brownell authorized the implantation of microphones for surveillance purposes involving 'espionage agents, possible sabo-

teurs and subversive persons'. In the memo, Brownell excuses the violation of individual 'trespass' as necessary for the 'considerations of national security' and 'national safety' (although, as Robert Goldstein notes, the FBI had been conducting illegal microphone surveillance since 1940) (Goldstein 1978: 340).

Plath's speaker employs the 'I' pronoun as its principal form of defense against the betrayal of the male 'Other' whose illicit—we can only assume—marital betrayal, threatens the privacy and security of the family home. Betrayal brings with it outside scrutiny; it also brings with it the presence of another, in this case, the figure of the female mistress/adulteresses whose sinister 'dark' and 'cosmetic effects' hover around the edge of poem. The poem begins with an image of the liminal: the male figure entering the family home wiping his lips (instead of his feet). This poem is filled with references to the presence of a female 'other'/mistress he brings with him, whose presence forms a rival intimacy to the speaker's own. Doubleness[14] is a key rhetorical device in Plath's poem, enabling her speaker to shift rapidly from the aggressive to the defensive, from attacker to victim, from accuser to accused. As the point of the poem is to lay blame, it serves the speaker well to occupy as many subject positions as possible, and permit the accused none; hence, the speaker creates a split self, between which lurks a third, perhaps actual self that always hovers between two versions of self suggested by the rival women now occupying the home. The women are brought together through the image of a cat: 'Between myself and myself/ I scratch like a cat' (*CP* 202). Hence, self and other are merged into a form of double self, a process that elides the 'Other' and makes it the spoken territory of the speaker/self. The tactics of the speaker are thus designed to eliminate the position of her rival. This is clearly a defensive tactic against the intrusive presence of the now adulterous husband and his mistress, and so in order to protect the intimacy of the private realm, the home, the 'I' voice asserts itself over the text in position of defensive-surveillance.

Ariel and the Panoptic 'I'

The theme of violated privacy frames Plath's series of 1962 poems. Indeed, the invasion of privacy is the central tenet in the confessions of Plath's March 1962 poem, 'Three Women', echoing the fearful position of the non-American before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The investigative body in this instance is the medical authorities, an anonymous but ubiquitous presence whose white-coated agents make up: 'The faces of nations,/ Governments, parliaments, societies,/ The faceless faces of important men' (*CP* 179). These 'faceless faces' constitute the male officials of congressional investigative committees; like the white-coated doctors described by the 'Third Voice' of 'Three Women', they 'move among' their subjects taking them by 'surprise' (*CP* 179, 180). The speaker identifies these 'jealous men' as her adversaries, and hence this 'I' is engaged in a struggle with the image of 'these men' who 'would have the whole world flat' (*CP* 179). This struggle is synonymous with the erosion of the individual's right to expression, and so the 'I' of the text imposes itself in an act of defiance of those male agencies that threaten to 'flatten and launder' the speaker's speech (*CP* 179).

Plath's speaker imposes her gaze over the text in a manner reminiscent of the imposition of the panoptic prison tower of Jeremy Bentham adopted by Michel Foucault for his theory of panopticism. In this sense, the 'I' of the text imposes a form of vigilance, a monitoring panoptic 'I'. Following Foucault's theory of panopticism, the purpose of the panoptic tower was to hold in place those subjected to its gaze, so that even the smallest of a prisoner's movements could be monitored.[15] Hence, the elevated and protected status of the confessional 'I', with its superior stance of self-knowledge privileges the speaker with a complete view of the text; it also affords her a defensive protection as only she can tell us her 'secret' ('A Secret', *CP* 219): her own carefully selected version of the text. Like the viewer positioned in the panoptic tower, the 'I' of the speaker asserts its vertical gaze over the topography of the text whilst concealing the identity of the viewer: 'The eye of

a little god, four-cornered' (*CP* 173). In the case of the Plathean 'I' it is a statement of both self-defense and self-assertion against the intrusive gaze of the outsider: 'I am vertical/ But I would rather be horizontal' (*CP* 162). It is a statement of the speaker's reluctant position: defensive, hyper-alert, hyper-vigilant, paranoiac, a statement endemic of Cold War paranoia.

For the 'I' voice of the speaker, however, the panoptic position affords her omniscience beyond the language of these women, with whom she shares solidarity. From the elevated position of the 'I', the speaker can disassociate from the activities of her scrutinizer; furthermore, she can function as a kind of tribunal judge, determining her own processes of self-scrutiny. Written in the interrogative voice, these 1962 poems function as a series of 'hearings' in which the speaker herself assumes the role of chief interrogator. By the time of 'Daddy' in October 1962, the speaker has assumed for herself the sort of rhetorical power we associate with personalities such as McCarthy. To take this analogy further, the function of the 'Daddy' persona is the same as that of McCarthy or any other apparatus of the U.S. Justice Department: a *deus ex machina* that solicits a series of investigative 'hearings' on the loyalty of the speaker's self to her 'real' self. It would seem that the purpose of 'Daddy', is to remove, once and for all, the threat of the Other—in whatever form it may come. In the case of this particular poem, it is the appearance of the father figure as a form of disruptive and uncanny threat to the speaker's present self that just will not 'do' anymore. 'Daddy', then, constitutes a necessary elimination of the past from the present in order that the speaking self may reconfigure who or what she is; and so, although the figure on trial is the father as he features in the memory of the speaker, really it is the speaker's former self that is on trial. The outcome of the poem's dramatic *dénouement* is the exorcism of the former self, and by implication, the arrival of the new. Before we arrive at 'Daddy', however, the speaker must first carry out her own very public enquiry over the realm of the private, the home.

The erosion of constitutional rights is a theme that flickers through

these 1962 poems. The speaker of 'The Courage of Shutting Up' refers to 'a country no longer heard of' whose 'flags' have been 'folded' (*CP* 210)—a certain reference to the fragile position of individual rights to free speech and privacy during the Cold War. As Deborah Nelson observes, the right to privacy in the home became one of the political preoccupations of the sixties (Nelson 1996: 89). In 'Words Heard by Accident Over the Phone' (*CP* 202, 203), the poet creates a typical Cold War nightmare scenario in which an unknown source of surveillance penetrates the privacy of the home. This ambiguous source is personified as a silent and insidious presence at the end of a phone-line, a persona whose undeclared intentions sullies the home-life:

> O mud, mud, how fluid!—
> Thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse.
> Speak, speak! Who is it? . . .
> - - -
> What are these words, these words?
>
> (*CP* 202)

What makes the situation so pernicious to the speaker is the ambiguous motive of the silent 'speaker' at the end of the line. The speaker must discern, as with all those observed during the Cold War era, the loyalties and motives of its surveyor. As Nelson states, the seminal 1965 Supreme Court case Griswold v Connecticut established under the letter of the law the constitutional right to privacy—a case that actualized the cultural crisis of privacy emanating from the wider Cold War culture. Plath's speaker is clearly drawing from this privacy crisis, as something of a 'lost thing' towards the end of the 1950s—of which Griswold v Connecticut is the final testimonial (Nelson 2002: xiv-xv). In Plath's poem, the words emitted from the phone are not, as the poet suspects, for herself, but for her absent husband: 'they are looking for a listener/ Is he here?' voice of the conspirator searches the room for its accomplice and not finding him, 'withdraws its tentacle' (*CP* 203).

A Paranoid Psyche: The Danger of Words

The confident position of the 'I' voice belies the tremendous paranoia associated with the verbal or written word. 'Words Heard by Accident Over the Phone' (*CP* 202, 203) explores the loquaciousness of a personal and private voice in relation to a dangerous political environment. Indeed, the unchecked verbal flow of the first person voice is the most dangerous political tool for the 'listening' authorities. The 'lover of digestibles' that is the voice of the poet-speaker threatens to compromise her political integrity, expose and betray her political persuasion. Indeed, the tremendous tension between silence and speech constitutes the metaphorical bulk of these 1962 poems. Speech necessitates danger and so the speaker of 'The Courage of Shutting Up' (*CP* 209, 210) asks whether it is necessary for the tongue to be 'cut out' (*CP* 210). On the political level, this rhetoric mirrors the corrosive effects of such Cold War governmental legislation as the 1950 Internal Security Act: in the words of Robert Goldstein this was 'one of the most massive onslaughts against freedom of speech and association ever launched in American history'. The Act included an emergency proviso for the roundup of suspected dissidents with indefinite detention (Goldstein 1978: 323). The stark profile of the 'I' voice deliberately draws the suspicion of investigators: elevated, defiant, theatrical even, the 'I' of the speaker demands an audience, demands the constitutional right to free speech.

Plath's 'The Courage of Shutting Up' (*CP* 209, 210) explores the tension between speech and silence and the danger of verbal and visual communication of any kind—even within the environs of the home. This is a recreation of a tribunal of sorts, reminiscent of the House Un-American Activities Committee launched in 1947 to investigate Hollywood subversions, the same year that President Truman imposed loyalty oaths on federal employees.[16] Plath's poem alludes to the process of interrogation and transcription that lay at the heart of the Cold War administration. The speaker's silence is belied by the image of 'black disks', 'disks of outrage', 'loaded' with incriminating speech. These

are the spools of the recording tape, disks that carry quantities of vocal evidence of 'bastardies/ Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness' (*CP* 210). Although silence is the speaker's central preoccupation, it is the potential for ending the silence that provides the immense tension of the poem. This tension builds until the penultimate stanza when an image of an interrogation chamber explodes into being. It is 'the eyes, the eyes; the eyes' that do the interrogating here, a metonymy for the 'terrible room[s] . . . in which a torture goes on' (*CP* 210). Plath's clever play upon the theme of seeing, and being seen, suggests a power play between subject and object whose game is played out against the threat of verbal betrayal—the betrayal of the informer. These are the games of the interrogation chamber whose attendant witnesses are the 'mirrors' that can 'kill and talk'. Behind the reflective and shiny surfaces of these mirrors is the shadowy figure of the informer (*CP* 210).

Plath's poem points to what Victor Navasky describes as 'the state's chosen instrument of destruction' during the Cold War years—the professional informer—with (in the words of Edward Shils) 'a steady stream of information about the extent to which Communists . . . penetrated and plotted to subvert American institutions' (Navasky 2002: 1). The presiding preoccupation of the anti-Communist campaign was the gathering of intelligence against those deemed dangerous or subversive. This intelligence was accrued by means of testimonials, a programme of enforced public speech. The right to remain silent was offset against the right to free speech, both threatened by tactical policies of intimidation and threats. 'The Courage of Shutting Up' is a clever exposition of the Cold War obsession with disclosure and silence, the loss of freedom of speech described by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas as 'The Black Silence of Fear' (Schrecker 1994: 1). 'The disks of outrage' testify to the loud and enforced silence of a generation in submission to government authorities. The Communist Control Act of 1954 sets out the dangerous implications of written or verbal communication that might implicate 'the organisation' (Filreis 1999). Hence, the written or spoken word was loaded with danger, with the potential act of betrayal.

We Will Usurp 'You': The End of Free Speech

In Plath's 'A Secret' (10 October 1962), a mock dialectical encounter between first and second person voices mimics the kind of staged rapprochement of the 1959 'kitchen debate' between American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev. In the famous World Wide photo of that encounter, the American statesman addresses the Communist Premier in a show of rhetoric designed to convince his opponent of the superiority of the American dream. Body language, however, speaks volumes: Khrushchev is turned away from his 'opponent', while Nixon stares out upon those consumer goods deemed to be 'the essence of American freedom' (May 1988, 16). Hence, the rhetoric of the American falls between the 'commodity gap' of the two nations: between the 'thou' of the Communist who categorically rejects the assumed superiority of the American stance—and the 'I' of the American statesman. Nixon's panoptic 'I' (here substituted for the great American 'we'), assumes an ideology that fixes the communist within the gaze of the supervising and superior self of the American nation. Hence, the communist becomes a subject with a fixed meaning, subject to the judgement of the dominant American social structure whose ideology includes the right (in the words of Richard Nixon) to 'have many different kinds of washing machines so that housewives can choose' (qtd. May 1988: 17).

Hence, fixed by an almost zealous belief in the superior ideology of Eisenhower's 'the American way' of life, the 'Other' is subjected to ruthless surveillance and investigation. The 'you' of Plath's 'A Secret' satirizes the 'superior' swagger of McCarthy's subcommittee:

> A secret! A secret!
> How superior.
> You are blue and huge, a traffic policeman,
> Holding up one palm—
>
> (*CP* 219)

This investigative agency is set upon defining the 'difference between us' (*CP* 219) the difference that separates American from non-American, loyal citizen from disloyal: a paranoiac urge to locate those differences and have them defined as illegitimate—like the baby in 'Lesbos' (*CP* 7-30). The surrealism of the poem echoes the lunacy of the campaign, and so the speaker asks itself, will 'the African giraffe in its Eden greenery' 'show through' (*CP* 219). The African giraffe in its Eden greenery (*CP* 219).

The sordid techniques of loyalty investigators, men such as Roy M. Cohn, appointed by McCarthy as chief subcommittee counsel of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, substantiate the image of the 'knife that can be taken out/ To pare nails,/ To lever the dirt' (*CP* 220).

'Daddy': The Totalitarianism of the 'I'

'Daddy' (*CP* 222-224) is the ultimate testament to Cold War violation of free speech. In an aggressive campaign of intimidation and terror, the imperiously armed figure of the 'I' succeeds in disarming the voice of the second person voice. The speaker turns to the German first person pronoun for her assault against the 'other', its guttural sound perfectly suited for the purposes of 'roughing up' her subject.[17] The aural resonance of 'ich, ich, ich' is suggestive of the type of violence associated with Gestapo techniques of interrogation: brutal, repetitive and unrelenting—thus the 'I' beats the second person voice into submission. Her tactics are cruel: seizing the 'you' of the 'other', she turns it upon her subject, brandishing it like a weapon over her cowering, defenseless subject. 'Ich, ich, ich' is replaced by 'you, you, you' in a clever inversion of textual identity: the net result, the removal of the second person voice. In the tradition of totalitarian, the speaker of 'Daddy' forbids the right of its subject to answer back. 'Daddy', then is a poem of ritualistic silencing in which the second person voice of the father is shut down by the totalitarian tactics of the speaker. Conjuring

up a series of stills of the father figure—the man at the blackboard, the man who is 'marble heavy' and 'a bag full of God', the man who is 'the Aryan eye' (I), Plath's speaker ritualistically disposes of these images, removes them from the photo album. As in the earlier poem, 'The Other', the speaker usurps the position of the second person voice, incorporating it into her own dominant rhetoric; and so 'you' and 'I' become one.

'Daddy', then, marks a hiatus in the relationship of the 'I' to the other. The usurpation of the second person by the 'I' voice signals a form of rhetorical silencing. Daddy's famous 'ich, ich, ich' is evocative of the barked orders of General Macarthur as depicted in Carl Mydans's photo for *Life*.[18] Here, the General is caught in mid-speech, rallying against his subjects with all the authority of a despot. Ironically, this photo, taken during the Inchon Landing, marked the height of Macarthur's despotic reign in an operation carried out against the advice of his colleagues, and which consequently marked the beginning of his demise (Halberstam 1993: 420). Macarthur's hefty presence upon the American political stage ended with his dramatic removal from office by the Truman administration. Captured in full army regalia, waving to the masses, Macarthur is the very picture of a proud, but silenced despot. The coarse, full-blooded rhetoric of his military campaigns has been replaced by a salutary gesture—the wave of a man eclipsed by his own hubristic vision.

Conclusion

In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr, Plath admitted to interest in the figure of the stunted dictator, Napoleon (Orr 1967: 169). Written early October 1962, Plath's series of Bee poems attest to her interest in the figure of the despot. In 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' (*CP* 212, 213) the figure of Caesar and the Roman mob appears; in 'The Swarm', Napoleon features as a despot 'swarming' all over Europe. By the time of 'Daddy' (October 12th), the 'endless' terrain of the conquering despot

has been curtailed (*CP* 217). In 'Daddy', and then in the later 'Lady Lazarus' (October 23-29), the 'I' makes a final rally for supremacy, before it withdraws into a quieter mode. 'Mystic' and 'Words', both written 1 February 1963, witness the conquering 'I' slipping into retreat. It is easy to argue for a sort of rhetorical implosion: caught in its own heat, the force of the 'I' implodes. The overextended self abounds in Plath's late October 1962 poems. In the final stanza of 'Poppies in October' (October, of course, historically speaking, being a month of revolution), we confront the image of an open-ended utterance of self-questioning: 'O my God, what am I' (*CP* 240). The 'I' appears to have lost a sense of who or what it is; its utterances are undirected and signify a state of ontological crisis. In 'Getting There', 6 November 1962, the speaker has already begun to limit herself: 'It is so small/ the place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles' (*CP* 249). It would seem that the end result of the expansive revenge cycle of 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', their rhetoric of shame and blame, has led to a rather reduced dramatic space, a foreshortened and foreclosed protagonist; what the speaker desires now is a counting and burial of the dead she has left in her wake (*CP* 249).

As in the televised debacle of the McCarthy hearings, Plath's rhetorician is snared in the unloosed power of her words. McCarthy's nemesis during the hearings, Army attorney, Joseph Welch, like McCarthy, was a consummate actor who savored the public arena as much as McCarthy. Welch, profiting from McCarthy's reversal of fortune, was able to capitalize on the Senator's propensity for turgid rhetoric, turning McCarthy's own oratory into a campaign of shame. Hence, the same sort of bullish rhetoric responsible for the Senator's ascendancy also precipitated his downfall. His searing attack against veteran General Ralph Zwicker crowned a series of unfounded accusations: you're 'not fit to wear that uniform' McCarthy declared (qtd. Fried 1990: 137). With the eyes of the nation upon him, McCarthy sank into disgrace. By June 1954 Gallup polls revealed 45% of the nation were negatively disposed to the Senator. Welch sealed the lid on McCarthy's

fate with the resonant: 'Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?' (Fried 1990: 139).

The speaker of Plath's 'Mystic' declares herself to be 'used utterly', reduced to a memory of her former self. The content of her rhetoric has become 'dry and riderless', governed by a doomful sense of pending fate. Reduced, she now addresses her audience from 'the bottom of a pool' where the 'fixed stars' of another's ideology and discourse 'govern [her] life' ('Words', 270). In 'Words', the final 'word' is given to the classical voice of Fate; in 'Edge' it is 'the illusion of a Greek necessity' that prevails (*CP* 272)—and so an older logic replaces the model of self-determination espoused at the end of 'Lady Lazarus': 'I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air' (*CP* 247).

The Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 pitted two styles of drama and rhetoric against one another: as Thomas Doherty notes, 'the heated bombast of McCarthy versus the calm demeanor of Welch'; in McLuhan's terms, a 'hot personality melted under the glare of television while a cool one never broke sweat' (qtd. Doherty 2003: 190). 'Mystic' and 'Words' are poems that fail to rail round rhetorically speaking, poems in which the bombast of the 'I' voice has been relinquished, its ballsy character shrunk from view. Plath's final poems demonstrate a surrender to a more ancient world view: the 'Greek necessity' of 'Edge' recalls a civilisation that gave birth both to the study of logic and rhetoric as tools of persuasion, but also to a deeply seated belief in the prevailing logic of Fate—a logic that stands beyond the bounds of the rhetorician's art.

Although this series of 1962 poems stage the politics of the personal and the familial—a wife addressing her husband and in turn his mistress, a daughter addressing her dead father—the language of the these late performances are clearly imitative of a form of rhetoric in keeping with a wider discourse. The bombast of the 'I' voice equips Plath's speaker with a powerful tool with which to preside over those 'others' that threaten to destabilize the status quo of her current self, and so, in 'Daddy', the speaker calls upon the 'villagers' to oust out the phantom-

menace of the father, as the ritualistic removal of the father figure becomes a community affair. The co-option of a larger voice signals the 'I' voice opening itself up to the wider jurisdiction of a 'we'—other bodies that will legitimize its claims. The scrutiny of the 'I' is ultimately directed against itself, as it becomes increasingly clear that the purpose of monitoring 'the other' is a self-reflexive project. Although Plath's late poems are filled with the sound of 'others', they are also just as much about the sound of the self overhearing itself speak. The late poem, 'Death & Co' (14 November 1962) makes this quite clear. The speaker declares herself fundamentally split: 'Two, of course there are two/ It seems perfectly natural now—' (*CP* 254). This double or 'other' self that runs all through Plath's body of work is also a potential assassin, and so the 'I' voice marks itself out as a target: 'I am red meat', and in the final lines of the poem, the death bell tolls, and the self's epigraph is written: 'Somebody's done for'. Like the earlier 'In Plaster' (March 1961), one self preys upon the other, demanding an ontological ultimatum. It is perhaps an obvious tactic to throw up these warring selves to a larger self, an 'I' that also co-opts a 'we', in order to resolve this fundamental opposition. In order to permit the existence of one self, the jurisdiction of the 'other' must be overthrown. The only solution, it would seem, to the happy cohabitation of these two selves is to 'meet in another life', for the Me and the You to 'meet in air' ('Lesbos', *CP* 228). The ultimate logic of Plath's public rhetoricians is that two speakers cannot hold sway over the same poetic space.

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Notes

*Plath, *The Collected Poems*. From henceforth Plath's *Collected Poems* will be referred to as *CP*.

1. 'A Woman Unconscious', from Ted Hughes' 1960 collection of poems, *Lupercal* (London: Faber & Faber), p. 15.

2. Kennan's 'long telegram' also appeared in the July 1947 edition of *Foreign Affairs*.

3. See Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt Jr., *The Cold War as Rhetoric*.

4. 'The Rhetorical Construction of History' in *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst & H.W. Brands (Texas A&M University Press, 2000), p. 3.

5. Robert L. Scott. 'Cold War and Rhetoric: Conceptually and Critically' in *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology*, by Martin Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott. Rev ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), p. 4.

6. In Plato: *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1961): pp. 229-307, 475-525.

7. This argument is summarized succinctly by Martin J. Medhurst in his Introductory essay to *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst & H. W. Brands (Texas A&M University Press, 2000), pp. 3-17.

8. See Robert L. Scott, 'On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic' in *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967), pp. 9-17.

9. See Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture*.

10. *The Bell Jar*'s recurring image of babies and foetuses seem to imply a nation in need of rebirth; the fact that the face of the Eisenhower baby is 'blank' alludes to the need for the text of the contemporary American nation to be rewritten.

11. See Robin Peel, *Writing Back*, 58-59.

12 As Robin Peel notes, this image is taken from the 6 June 1960 copy of *Life* and represents the official White House portrait of the president, Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison/Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), p. 59.

13. Sylvia Plath collage, 1960. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

14. Doubleness is key Plathean theme throughout the 1950-1960 period, from her undergraduate Smith College thesis on the role of the double in Dostoevsky, to the reoccurring figure of the doppelgänger in poems such as 'Two Sisters of Persephone' (1956), *Collected Poems*, pp. 31, 32, and 'In Plaster' (1961) *Collected Poems*, p. 158-160.

15. For a description of this process of panoptic viewing see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 195-228.

16. See Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium* (2003), p. 15.

17. The German language also recalls an 'other' real enemy of American and her allies during World War II.

18. See W. R. Johnson's *The Idea of Lyric* (1982).

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The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*

Kate A. Baldwin

> A competent critic can do a good deal even for the most prominent writer. An intelligent critical article is like a bunch of birch twigs for anyone who enjoys a steam bath—he lashes himself with the twigs as he takes the bath, or if he doesn't want to do it himself, someone else does it for him.
>
> —Nikita Khrushchev, 1964

Potboilers

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "*The Bell Jar*"? Haunting American classic? Girl on the verge of a nervous breakdown? Flawed first novel? Not her again! For many people the answer lies somewhere between these phrases. And to be sure the book invites such sentiment, a feeling of empathy or even pathos for the failings of its protagonist (and perhaps its author) to find solace. The lure or enticement of the reaction, or affect, that the book triggers is one that accounts at least in part for the book's stunning popularity even forty years after its initial publication. Sylvia Plath has indeed become a cottage industry. In 2003 alone, a major motion picture called *Sylvia*, an off-Broadway production based on *The Bell Jar*, the publication of the *Sylvia* screenplay, a biography of Plath's estranged husband Ted Hughes called, simply, *Her Husband*, and the megabookstore displays which purposefully confuse *The Bell Jar* with Gwyneth Paltrow's movie role as Sylvia together have created a media frenzy. Focus Features' tagline for the movie, "life was too small to contain her," serves as a mandate to consumers: Life may have been too small, but Sylvia is large enough that everyone can and should have a piece of her.[1] What we learn from this is not only savvy marketing strategies and the cultivation of a kind of mass literary taste for the classics, but also that the terms of female "containment" continue to plague Plath. "Containment" was of course the term coined by George Kerman in 1947 in

"The Sources of Soviet Conduct" to describe both American domestic and foreign policy during the Cold War.

It is perhaps because of its uncanny sense of perpetual female entrapment that Plath's story moves people such that *The Bell Jar* and its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, are compounded with their author and millions of readers in a circuit of feeling: we are encouraged to feel with or through *The Bell Jar*. This circuit of emotion situates *The Bell Jar* alongside a genre of fictions of sentiment. The novel participates in a process of substitution and repetition, and the feelings that these processes instantiate multiply through the novel's mass production. While much Plath criticism has attended to the various implications of such identifications for an Anglo-American, largely female, English-speaking audience, little attention has been paid to the moments in which such affection breaks down; that is, the places in the book in which the text incites not so much the troubling lines between desire and identification but distance and perhaps even dislike. Alternatively, my line of inquiry asks us not so much to read against the circuit of sentiment, but to radically resituate the sentiments raised—not to short circuit them, but to re-circuit them.

In order to resituate the way in which the novel is typically read, I should briefly outline the book's complex publishing history. It was released in England in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas and published again in Britain in 1967 under Plath's name. In 1971, the book was published, against her mother's wishes, in the U.S. The untimeliness of Plath's death a month or so after *The Bell Jar*'s first British publication has provided fertile territory for the author/protagonist conflation and has made it virtually impossible to read the book with the terms that it provides us: our attention is always tweaked in the direction of the autobiographical, even though Plath commented wryly that the book was a "potboiler" (Ames 262), thereby hinting at the degree to which artifice and unreliability might be some of its key ingredients.[2] Even criticism that seeks to avoid biographically based analysis ends up invoking the author in order to stake a truer claim about her

text. A recent study set out to track down each political journal Plath read and so ascertain her opinion on issues as diverse as nuclear bombs and breast feeding. This attempt to make Plath into a political author is not at a great distance from the critical assessment that, in the words of the *New York Times*, "it's impossible to read *The Bell Jar* [without] the knowledge of Sylvia Plath's doom color[ing] its pages" (Lehmann-Haupt 35). If we insist on prioritizing the morbid Plathian prism as the primary means of investigating the novel, then we miss what I term its radical imaginary.

The novel emerges from a specific context: it was written by an American living in London during a period of heated political debate about the future of Americanness, about a period in the U.S. ten years earlier. *The Bell Jar* provides us with the terms to think through this transatlantic intersection of impulses, offering key encounters that have remained overlooked in favor of the more savory and sensational truth elements. Did she really bury herself alive? Was her mother a tyrant, her father a Nazi? Was Joan really a lesbian? These are the questions that inspire exegesis (and in the case of the latter, a lawsuit).

Alternatively, I propose we turn to two characters that have apparently failed to inspire critical interest. I suggest that we look at parts of the book that have been partially obliterated by the seductiveness of Esther's solipsism.[3] Two characters, a "Russian" and a "Negro," figure quite prominently at two key junctures in Esther's tale. The Russian appears during Esther's first failed attempt to dispense with that thing called her virginity, and the Negro appears following her first failed attempt to dispense with that thing called her life. In this classic Cold War text for which a denunciation of suburban, white, middle-class female constraint might seem to be the appropriate frame, what are the Russian and the Negro doing?[4] Does their presence correspond to anything? Connecting these important players in U.S. Cold War cosmography with a story that purportedly fits with Betty Friedan's book of the same year, *The Feminine Mystique*, might allow for a rethinking of this now overused notion of female containment. *The Fem-*

inine Mystique, we will recall, proclaimed the unnameability of white suburban female discontent in the 1950s, and encouraged women to "go out and get a job!" Work outside the home was the balm for female malaise. This is not to say that women were not subject to patriarchal attitudes and institutions that systematically removed them from the means of production in the 1950s, but rather to acknowledge alternative intelligences present in *The Bell Jar* that also announce a kind of female domestic incarceration.[5] While this book demands to be interpreted in the context of U.S. domestic containment, its narrative has as much to say about American women's relationship to national narratives that place, displace, and replace women in an international, geopolitical world order as it does about the relationship between U.S. domestic incarceration and the asylum. (Of course these two discourses are not mutually exclusive. They are, as we will see, importantly related.)[6]

The Bell Jar is written as a pseudo-memoir by a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who recalls the summer of 1953 as the summer when she first attempted to kill herself, as well as her ensuing attempts to recover and eventually emerge from the asylum, Belsize, where she undergoes intensive psycho- and electric shock therapies. Usually interpreted as a female *Bildungsroman*, a "rite of passage from adolescence into womanhood, from psychic distress into mental stability" (Davidson 186), the book invites us to share Esther's descent into madness and her emergence from it through a potent solipsism. But that first person, based on the tangents and nearly stream-of-consciousness narration that ensnares the reader, is also present as a warning. After all, if Esther is, as she constantly reminds us, a master of deception, might it not be important to read her against her word? The more self-absorbed Esther becomes, the more egregiously does she embody apathy towards the world around her. As I will elaborate, *The Bell Jar* offers impulses both towards mental health—an integrated selfhood—and towards the unfeasibility of such a selfhood; this is not, as is commonly thought, because of an impossible choice between "motherhood" and

"career," but rather because of the sexual, racial, and global terms of Esther's contradictory location. *The Bell Jar*'s ostensible emphasis on the cohesion of identity alongside the text's performance of such cohesion as an impossibility offers us an opportunity to query the ways in which isolated attention to selfhood and its inadequate fulfillment is also a distraction from the embeddedness of that self in different matrices of power and interconnected networks of knowledge production. I do not mean to imply that the "personal" is not "political" or that *The Bell Jar* refuses a reading of U.S. sexual politics during the Cold War—interpretations that certainly have offered rich analyses. Rather, as I will show, by looking at this novel, we can resituate what it suggests by these terms, the links between the sexual and the political, and the others implicated by these Cold War framing devices.

Understanding the context of both the political and the sexual is crucial and deserving of recapitulation. First, in broad strokes, the political. As I have discussed elsewhere, the Cold War is usually presented as a struggle based on two very different types of ideological power: American capitalism cum liberalism versus Soviet communism cum totalitarianism. This vision of hostile rivalry is based in a binary framework that squares American citizenship against its Soviet other, a framework that during the period enabled some U.S. citizens to determine a sense of self based in opposition to this Soviet other. Cold War critics have elaborated the means by which national narratives helped determine the key connotations and responsibilities of civic membership and participation. These theorizations of narratives role in building a sense of national community, naturalizing the relationship between people and territory, have created ways of analyzing and better understanding the relationships between subjectivity and citizenship during the Cold War period. Understanding the ways in which narrative can help to create social bonds amongst citizens has been key to a rethinking of the Cold War, its U.S. citizenry, and the reach of its logic through various cultural and social strata.[7] To be sure, *The Bell Jar* participates, with an almost gleeful abandon, in the normalizing rituals of

national narrativizing. Esther's search for selfhood through the dramatically opposed lives of poetry and motherhood offers us a character who throws herself against the limited options available to her like a furious pinball, aiming for and then bouncing away from discrete targets of female identity. But in spite of this dramatic pull towards the winning ticket of achieved selfhood, the text also resists an easy repetition of the common sense of American Cold War sociality.

Here lies the sexual. The book strains to reassure us that Esther has emerged from *The Bell Jar* and written the novel that remains as the material fact of her recovery. Esther's rebirth by electroconvulsive shock therapy (ECT) is, however, undercut by the multiple gaps the text summons: we are left with the uncanny sense of suspension.[8] Readers are left to wonder about that space between the novel's end and the writing of the narrative from that location of health and recovery. Ambivalence towards the narratives that would assure us of the protagonist's success in a U.S. Cold War idiom—marriage and motherhood—is made evident within the book's opening pages. Esther mentions "the baby" (presumably hers) once in an aside. Like the offhand comment that names it, "the baby" is brought in like a potted plant and then left unattended. The gap between the space of reputed remission at the end of the book and the opening place of the narrative within a dubious maternal fulfillment opens into a chasm. This space is punctuated by moments that suggest a negotiation of historically specific states of emergency.

The text, after all, opens with the 1953 electrocution of the Rosenbergs. It has been suggested that Ethel Rosenberg can be interpreted as a ghost of Esther Greenwood and, moreover, that Esther's ECT, which serves as the source of her proverbial rebirth, can be juxtaposed with Ethel Rosenberg's death by electrocution.[9] Ethel Rosenberg's status as a bad mother—an image the press went to great pains to construct—stays with Esther as a reminder that she must conform to the era's dictates and be a good mother. However, the consequences of bad motherhood in the 1950s are also, as Philip Wylie's cult of "momism" so

forcefully articulated, a vulnerability to outside coercion, a susceptibility to Soviet influence, or, perhaps worst of all, becoming a Soviet. As Andrew Ross has pointed out, the fear of the Rosenbergs was based on a perception of their ordinariness, "not because they harbored subversive, or violently revolutionary views (as Popular Fronters, they did not), but because they were so much like an ordinary, patriotic American couple" (20). At the same time, their liminality as Jews was never far from the surface.[10] The cultural logics of anticommunism, racism, and momism come together through a belief in the enemy within. The novel plays with this tentative logic, stringing along not only Ethel Rosenberg as a kind of Esther *doppelgänger*, but also introducing a Russian woman as a shadow reflection, a woman whom Esther temporarily but lustfully desires to be. By the binary logic of the era that the book so well depicts, the Russian woman must be announced because she is that which U.S. women must not be. Even more so than Ethel Rosenberg she is a sustaining enemy within, the other of U.S. Cold War femininity.

Who's Cooking?

If we have doubts about the status of the Soviet woman as other, we need only turn to the famous Kitchen Debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in July 1959. Turning to Moscow here is not incidental, for indeed, the kitchen provides its own uncanny undertow throughout *The Bell Jar*. There is no more stunning image of housewifery than that offered by Esther of the "kitchen mat" to describe the analogous relationship between woman and housewife during the 1950s (84-85). And recall, if you will, that Plath placed the novel in the kitchen idiom when she dubbed it a "potboiler." So permit me a detour to Moscow where this fiery exchange between Nixon and Khrushchev came about. (After all, Khrushchev's interest in literary criticism, as quoted in my epigraph, intimates a certain pressure on the limits of forbearance.) The debate took place at the

American exhibition at Sokolniki Park, advertised in the U.S. as a "corner of America in the heart of Moscow." The exhibition was designed to demonstrate the pleasures of U.S. consumption: "how America lives, works, learns, produces, consumes, and plays; what kind of people Americans are and what they stand for; and America's cultural values." As Felix Belair of the *New York Times* put it, "the purpose will be to show the abundance of the American economy as it is broadly shared by all the people, the immense variety and great freedom of choice and the conveniences available" (qtd. in Sandeen 128). The Russian visitors were to be captivated by things that were typically American: to this end the American single-family home—the tract house from Long Island—was indispensable. Other choice exemplars of the U.S. included a spectrum of American art by a Whitney Museum-appointed committee; a multi-screen introduction to America from Walt Disney; free cups of Pepsi; the latest in cars from Detroit; a display of cutting-edge farm machinery; and a supermarket armed with frozen food delights unavailable in Russia.[11] The *pièce de resistance* was a central geodesic dome into which visitors were funneled as they arrived. This was a circular "idea" building that enticed visitors into the large exhibition hall where they were met with an array of American consumer goods. One could spend hours analyzing the details of this magnificent performance of U.S. cultural values, but for my purposes it's important to recall that this exhibition was intended to showcase progress in American industry and respond in part to Sputnik—the Soviet's firing of an intercontinental ballistic missile in 1957. If this was a cold war, one waged through ideas, then Soviet technological sophistication was countered with national ideologies splayed out in the abundance of consumer choices and the productive capacity of the economy to please the buyer. Because the exhibition was the first weapon launched into enemy territory, care was taken to promote its success at home: as the Soviet press wryly noted, hundreds of U.S. journalists were sent along to cover Nixon's visit (*Lit. Gaz*. 2). And to be sure, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. World Report* and the *New York*

Times all carried multiple articles and photo essays documenting the whopping success of the American installation. Interestingly, the phrase "kitchen debate" never appears in Soviet coverage, nor in Khrushchev's memoir of the event. Yet it is a cultural moment clearly etched in the U.S. popular consciousness: when Nixon stood down the belligerent bulldog Khrushchev—and U.S. journalists captured it all.[12]

Through Nixon's strategic cunning, the exchange took place in the well-appointed and well-applianced kitchen of the exhibition's single family home. U.S. press coverage could thus confirm that U.S. superiority was lodged in freedom of consumer choice.[13] "Diversity," Nixon claimed in his diatribe, was synonymous with "the right to choose" ("Two Worlds" 1). Nixon's invocation of "diversity" as a matter of "choice" between abundant options was explicitly linked to the market. After all, Nixon said, "Americans were interested in making life easier for their women." When Khrushchev replied that the Soviet Union "did not have the capitalist attitude towards women," Nixon's retort was even more compelling: "I think that this attitude toward women is *universal*," he quipped. "What we want to do is make easier the lives of our housewives" (1). Nixon's confusion of "women" and "housewives" offers Khrushchev only a point of disjuncture: there are no housewives, *per se*, in Russia. Or, one might say, there are only housewives, but not the sort Nixon imagines—these housewives do have day jobs outside the home. Moreover, Nixon's collapsing of woman and housewife provides the ammunition for his pride in U.S. superiority by demonstrating that the supremacy of U.S. ideas could be showcased in the privacy of the home rather than on the public battlefield. Privacy, of course, was an operative term, and, as Deborah Nelson has explained, ambivalences surrounding the private lie at the heart of containment rhetoric. But privacy here hits more than its own violation (Nixon in the kitchen marks that kitchen as no longer private, of course). In Moscow, American privacy encounters its own absence. The translator was hard pressed to gloss Nixon's terms: there is no word for "privacy" in Russian. The kitchen in the Soviet context con-

notes that place in the *communalka*, or communal apartment, where running water may blur conversation so it cannot be overheard; it is the place of the faux-private, a space that reinforces who's cooking as a matter of ideology. For Khrushchev it is always a political site, and yet Nixon considers his movement to the domestic realm exemplary of democratic liberty, where ideas = goods in the interest of female autonomy and an exceptional idealization of the home as sacred. As we have already seen, however, the suburban kitchen was in fact defined by a sense of captivity and surveillance.[14] Thus the Russian translator only partially conveyed the specificity of Nixon's claims, which based their kitchen victory on seemingly paradoxical claims of public *and* private triumph. If this debate couldn't possibly signify for Soviets in the same way it did for U.S. citizens, was it truly a battle won for the Americans?

Alongside the correlative slip between women and housewives, one must also hear Nixon's declarations in the context of other timely pronouncements of Eisenhower's administration, namely, the declaration of "Captive Nations Week," just as Nixon was departing for Moscow. Captive Nations Week was a measure approved by Congress that called for "a week of prayer for peoples enslaved by the Soviet Union." Nixon's doublespeak in the kitchen thus declares, on the one hand, support for diversity in the marketplace in the name of liberating women. On the other hand, by making this attitude universal, it also compulsorily puts women in a position of captivity. (He isn't in Moscow promoting a wealth of new job opportunities for women, after all.) The universalizing tendency of global democracy encourages ease for its women, so long as they stay within the domestic sphere.[15] Women are ironically the "captive nation" brought to attention by Nixon's presence in his Moscow kitchen. And yet, female domesticity is not simply the incarceration of unwilling subjects. Housewives are not simply captives, but also positioned within that space as part of an ideology that lays claim to the universal, the global, what Amy Kaplan has called, regarding another era, a "manifest domesticity." Kaplan explains, "[i]f domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as

home, then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign" (582). Bolstering confidence in consumer choice and abundance may have provided a partial means of defraying the psychological and ideological costs of Sputnik. But it also displaced questions of diversity from the social to the supermarket, and dismissed actual economic diversity—that which "enslaved" millions of working-class blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and American Indians in the U.S.

Perhaps aware of Nixon's evasion of tensions concerning diversity and captivity in the U.S., the Soviet press had a field day with the American portrait of the debate. One humor magazine, *Krokodil*, went so far as to reconstruct the exhibition's wedding fantasy to include a scene of blissful interracial dancing.[16] The U.S. was ready to admit the gendering of Cold War terms and terrain, fighting the war on an openly feminine front in which diversity equaled consumer choice. Under these circumstances, the Soviet insistence on putting racial diversity front and center at the exhibition underscored the *purported* exclusion of race from gender—the disconnection between ideas and goods. Indeed, as this pastiche displays, the Soviets would never tire of reminding the U.S. how race and gender are always a part of the ideological construction of U.S. citizenship in that race always underlies the construction of the universality of the abstract individual as representatively male. Nixon's claim is thus clear: his attitude towards women is universal so long as the abstract individual is universally male.

But even this axiom had to be queried, for, in principle, this was not the case in the Soviet Union, where a uniform relationship to an Enlightenment intellectual heritage had been roundly challenged by 19th-century Russian thinkers. These thinkers considered Russia different and superior to Europe, a formation reconfigured by the 1920s Leninist framework of a new society free of gender and racial inequity. In Khrushchev's day this Leninist posture still resounded through socialist iconography and intent, if not actuality. And yet Nixon and Khrush-

chev alike seem to offer the frame of such patriarchy as their point of convergence. When troubled over common terms, Nixon and Khrushchev finally agree, "[w]e can all drink to the ladies"—a clink of glasses eliding the distance between "we" and "all"—the elite "we" and the populist "all" are purportedly linked by the unifying principle of being "for the ladies" ("Special International Report: Encounter" 18). And yet what this elision occludes is that the link between these two statesmen positions them within a masculinist lexicon of Enlightenment discourse, thus outside the lexicon of racial and sexual heterogeneity.[17] The organizing structure of the leaders' "clink" also relies on a kind of heterosexual contract—men being "for" the ladies—as the unifying principle of their connection. Nixon's claims to universalism contain a directive, the undertow of capitalism as a globalizing force in which gender is the "good," the recruiting agent that no Soviet can resist. In a sense, diversity itself was a captivating or, more accurately, a captive term.

At the same time, it is important to note that although the binding agent of heteronormativity may have been acknowledged through the raising of glasses, it was also a false connection—a moment in which the forced performance of unity was highlighted even by the U.S. popular press. *Time* magazine noted that "Nixon put his arm around Khrushchev, [and said] 'I'm afraid I haven't been a good host.' Khrushchev smiled and, underscoring *the weird aspect of the whole performance*, turned toward the American guide who had been standing in the model kitchen and said: 'Thank the housewife for letting us use her kitchen for our argument'" ("Better to See Once" 15, emphasis added). Khrushchev's address of thanks to the absent housewife via the translator troubles Nixon's attempt to host this exchange as one between men. Khrushchev's indirect addressing of the housewife breaks the magic of the solidifying bond between himself and Nixon. Membership in that men's club, Khrushchev reminds Nixon, is partial at best. They are, after all, in Moscow. The triangulated battle between men over women is a common mode of commerce, but the lack of actual interest in the ladies that this provocation summons is highlighted

by Khrushchev's retort. Heteronormativity may serve as a peremptory binding agent, but its artifice as a means of reducing women to goods, of distracting from the embeddedness of that practice in other regimes which Khrushchev claims to denounce (i.e. racism) is highlighted through his refusal to hug Nixon back. His performance accentuates the uncanny (*unheimlich*) aspect of this scene.

The picture of Russian-meets-American in *The Bell Jar* takes up the terms of the Nixon-Khrushchev encounter and shifts them, offering a link that pursues the feminine specter of translation. We are introduced to the unnamed Russian woman through Esther's much-anticipated date with Constantin, a Russian translator who works at the U.N.: "And while Constantin and I sat in one of those hushed plush auditoriums in the U.N., next to a stern muscular Russian girl with no makeup who was a simultaneous translator like Constantin, I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (75). Given all the "hot" issues debated in the summer of 1953—the Korean truce, fears of communism in the Middle East, U.S. trade embargos, the lingering instability following Stalin's death—it is telling that Esther's mind runs from her surroundings to her own troubled sense of self. She stares not at but "through the Russian girl in her double-breasted gray suit, rattling off idiom after idiom in her own unknowable tongue . . . and I wished with all my heart that I could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another" (75). The picture Esther draws for us of the Russian girl conforms to stereotype. "Muscular" and "stern," she defies American femininity, rebuking makeup and wearing a dull, outré double breasted suit.[18] *Life* magazine may have announced just a year earlier that "Iron Curtain Look Is Here!" (rpt. in Filreis ed.), but they were careful to delineate the difference between that "look" and the American one. (You can tell the American girl by her "slender gams.")[19] Yet frumpy as this female is, Esther, the pseudo-fashionista, is still drawn to her, and, more importantly, to her "unknowable" language. The desire to become the Russian girl is not simply about a

"negative identity politics" (Davidson 184). Rather, it is about the alarming lure of a particular kind of speech, speech as empty speech. The language of idioms is after all one in which meaning is non-coincidental with the literal. The text thus suggests the simultaneous enticement of national narratives that seem to offer identity as a solution and the foundation of that lure in rhetoric that is overblown, idiomatic, and empty. As Esther comments, to embody the Russian by "crawling inside her" would instantiate a particular kind of removed selfhood, rather than a revelation of the "enemy within," a return to the American-conceived Russian womb of empty speech: the "corner of America in the heart of Moscow."

It is Cold War speech that's empty, and that necessitates articulation and then translation into imprecise idioms. This summoning of female failed cross-cultural exchange does not invoke translation as failure *per se* but rather reflects a desire to feel that emptiness or nothing as *something*, to make non-coincidence a mode of being. It is a criticism of "simultaneous translation" as adequate to instantiate complete knowledge. We could see this as restaging the Nixon-Khrushchev encounter by emphasizing its weird performativity, its slippery, discontinuous production of meaning. As Gayatri Spivak has noted, translation requires a certain intimacy, and in Plath's scene infidelity is exposed as key to the exchange of knowledge about the other. What Esther voices is equal parts enforced misrecognition and desire. We should not forget that Esther's wish to sleep with a Russian, let alone to be a Russian, is alarmingly un-American (taking the parallel to Ethel Rosenberg much further). *The Bell Jar* offers us the opportunity to see U.S. Cold War femininity as caught up in the weird performance—as perpetuated by the U.S. media—of the Soviet other.[20] Indeed, Esther's whole encounter with the Russian woman talks back to a nostalgia for substance and sexual presence in which Esther, as a product of nation-building narratives, seems trapped. And *The Bell Jar* shows us how her desires are constructed through a narrative in which failure presents itself as the most promising alternative.

Since the American idiom has been relatively well-rehearsed, what would happen if we followed the text's lead and turned to the Soviet idiom? Esther's allusion to "the double-breasted suit" hints at more than bad taste in fashion. After all, for Russians the "double" is an enduring model of national consciousness.[21] Russian formulations of doubleness provided a means of articulating alienation from Western philosophies of identity. Geographically situated between East and West, and yet under the sway of European thought (sometimes captured by nationalist *ressentiment*), Russian intellectuals felt that Russia had been wrongly dubbed as inferior to the West. In response to this slight, 19th century theorists of Russian national identity angled for a place on the scale of world-historical progress established by their Western counterparts. Having been more or less dismissed by German idealist philosophy, Russian intellectuals believed that they had a key role to play in the future of the world. The belief persisted that Russian doubleness, the ability to embody both a Europeanness and a non-Europeanness simultaneously, made Russians unique. This providential duality is equally apparent in the intellectual genealogy of Dostoevsky and Vladimir Lenin, for whom the notion of nation presupposed that of gender.

Khrushchev's democratic turn in the mid-1950s, which has been called a period of "thaw," included a new interest in women's issues and the establishment of *zhensovety*, women-only councils devoted to developing ties between the Party and women. In his famous 20th Party Congress Speech in 1956, Khrushchev inquired about the activity of Soviets in party politics and pointed out that only ten members of the Central Committee were women. Thereafter he made women's issues more prominent, perhaps realizing that the inequalities of Soviet-style socialism had yet to be addressed (Buckley 265). It is arguable that in spite of Khrushchev's interest, which included a baldly stated concern for the declining population, the "woman question" remained bound by the available masculine-oriented terms in which diversity was part of totalitarian ideology that collapsed local knowledges into the supersignified of doubleness (Epstein 155).

Interestingly, Soviet women are understood in prevailing Soviet Studies accounts as oppressively housed under the "double burden" of domestic and workplace demands (Holland, Clements). In the post-WWII Soviet context, women were, to be sure, challenged by the dual demands of work and domesticity, but their articulation of resistance to these state-sponsored demands has been largely subsumed by narratives of Soviet national identity that deploy a representatively male paradigm. Following 1953, "The Great Patriotic War" against fascism became the key symbol of a national identity whose international view was more retrospectively defensive than forwardly aggressive. Whereas militaristic images of patriotism valorized male heroism, robust images of maternity encapsulated in the figure of Mother Russia were used to suggest female endurance and maternal sufferance, normalizing the feminine into a romantic figure for male control over the nation. A resurgence of traditional distinctions between the sexes signaled a turn to conservative "family values" and conventional gender roles, and a corporealization of the nation as mother rendered compulsory the relationship between Russia and female citizens.

Some Soviet women authors offered compelling revoicings of the notion of Russian cultural doubleness, taking as a point of departure the contradiction between Russian cultural messianism and the ostracism of the everyday, or *byt*.[22] Some of this literature facilitates a reconception of woman's relationship to Soviet national identity, exploring the double burden to articulate, differently, the cultural nationalism of the Russian double.[23] What, then, might it mean to read *The Bell Jar* as *byt*? Esther's relationship to the quotidian, in which the everyday is the despised location of the feminine and the esteemed location of national superiority, would propose another identificatory detour through the *kommunalka*, and its supersignified, to suggest a longing for a selfhood not dependent upon a mystique of the Cold War other, the suppression of racial diversity, and the usurping of local knowledges into a supersignified.

Plotboilers

> The most effective kind of propaganda was defined as the kind where the subject moves in the direction you desire for reasons which he believes to be his own.
>
> —U.S. National Security Council Directive, 1950[24]

As some of the *byt* literature suggests, Soviet women were poised at a crossroads between the allegedly uni-economic but multi-national Soviet Union. Similarly, Esther's encounter with a black kitchen worker at Belsize recalls her parallel encounter with the Russian woman. Again, the presence of the kitchen here is not incidental. It underscores the purported absence of race from the Kitchen Debate and likewise from the dilemma of U.S. female captivity during the Cold War. This kitchen worker is introduced as follows: "Usually it was a shrunken old white man that brought our food, but today it was a Negro" (180). The logic of equivalences presented here suggests that the black man is not simply a substitute for a white man, but rather a substitute for a "shrunken old white man." (The worker's masculinity is equivalent to that of a decrepit white geriatric.) If this were not insult enough, he is accompanied by a woman "in blue stiletto heels" who was "telling him what to do." The heels correlate to the insinuated sexuality of white femininity here. The woman's sexuality is lodged in her unavailability to the Negro, and articulates itself as superiority and bossiness: she instructs him, and he obeys while "grinning and chuckling in a silly way" (180). Not only is the black male explicitly emasculated and nameless, thus establishing the sexual economy of taboo that is ingrained in white supremacy, but he also performs his duties with token compliance.

In spite of his namelessness, however, the Negro is the one character in the novel who reads Esther accurately. He listens to her impertinent order "we're not done . . . you can just wait" and responds by calling her "Miss Mucky-Muck," (181). Esther, as no one has yet dared to an-

nounce, is a little shit. She complains when he serves two kinds of beans at a meal: "beans and carrots, or beans and peas, maybe; but never beans and beans," she growls. In retaliation, Esther kicks him and declares, "That's what *you* get" (181-82).[25] Esther's sense of entitlement propels her "you" (as opposed to "I" or "we")—hurling difference in its wake. What the text tells us is that Esther's character is grounded in her relationship to choice. This is her whole problem in a nutshell: she wants it all, but purportedly can't have it. She is the American girl spoiled by choice. However, the text makes explicit here the parameters of that choice, and who is implicated. Her reaction to the kitchen worker is all about his insufficient presentation of choice: the beans and carrots, beans and peas, but never beans and beans. The choice he presents is no choice: it's beans and beans. Faced with this apparent lack of choice, she behaves badly, an indulged brat, as he says, "Miss Mucky-Muck."

The book thus elaborates upon the differential possibilities of choice as they make themselves available to white women and African Americans during this era. Sandwiched between her exchanges with the kitchen worker is a brief scene in which Esther overturns a tray of thermometers so that the mercury balls glisten with potential dispersal, as she says "into a million little replicas," but if pushed together "would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again" (183). The book is clear about Esther's choice in the Cold War asylum: either you chose a million selves or one whole self. But the book also articulates this as a false dichotomy between the fractured and the whole. During this era, the state's demand for a relationship between woman and nation can be extrapolated from a 1950 U.S. National Security Directive that sought to move the subject "in the direction [the state desires] for reasons which [s]he believes to be [her] own" (qtd. in Saunders 4). This anticipation of Althusserian interpellation, in which the state conditions the subject to be an ideal participant, was part of what was termed "psychological warfare" necessary to systematically defeat the Soviets. As Frances Stonor Saunders has noted, such warfare was defined by the

government as "the planned use by a nation of propaganda and activities other than combat which communicate ideas and information intended to influence the opinions, attitudes, emotions and behavior . . . in ways that will support the achievement of national aims" (4). Within this context, then, *The Bell Jar*'s emphasis on the cohesion of identity alongside the text's performance of the impossibility of such an identity invites us to query the ways that isolated attention to selfhood and its inadequate fulfillment are correlated through Cold War others so as to produce "emotions and behavior" that will "support the achievement of national aims."

The fiction of integrated selfhood that the asylum offers her is one in which such integration relies on the marginalization, the repeated replication of Negro selfhood as always already broken. This brings us back to Nixon's proclamation of diversity as equal to the abundance of choices. *The Bell Jar* points out that to be a million of herself or one integrated whole is after all not a choice—like the beans and beans it offers no choice. This is the novel's response to Nixon's claims, the binary either/or logic of an era in which to be better or integrated is just another version of being plural—a million self-replicating pieces. What would be diverse would be to open selfhood to difference. In these glances, *The Bell Jar* does just that. Esther notes, "Soon after they had locked the door, I could see the Negro's face, a molasses colored moon, risen at the window grating, but I pretended not to notice" (183). This image presents us with the black worker peering into Esther's prison, but also suggests that he could as easily be peering out from his. What we learn from this passage is that her imprisonment relies in part on his and vice versa. This is, of course, the point that Esther pretends not to notice.

If she and he are each trapped, and his lack of choice is hers, these are not analogous locations. After all, Esther has the fiction of integrated selfhood at her fingertips, whereas he remains with more limited access to that fiction. (She is more at leisure to be herself precisely because she is not one of the others identified by the novel.[26]) The kick

tells us that this is no simple parallel, but one that relies on her misrecognition, a misrecognition which is so startling as to produce a kick. But we must recall that it is also the readers who are targets of that proverbial kick in the almost-groin: the "you" is "us." That's what "we" get for buying the logic of *The Bell Jar*, the asylum, the false premise of choice.

So, we might ask, is it only Esther's life that the book holds in balance? If, as Ruth Feldstein has argued, the liberal state emerged during the Cold War as a provenance of racial tolerance that went hand in hand with gender conservatism, *The Bell Jar* parts from such coupling and documents how gender conservatism not only manacled white women but also correspondingly genders black men. Moreover, if Friedan's "feminine mystique" derives in part from a lack of sufficient language to describe the constraints of patriarchy, then *The Bell Jar* responds by documenting how a language was indeed present although perhaps not the one Friedan's book imagined. It was one that linked the discontent of white middle-class women to racial emancipation and the demystification of the Soviet other. The text summons these two key myths to offer rebuttals both to Cold War master narratives and to liberal feminist attempts to counter those narratives (e.g. Friedan).[27] Linked by their status as unnamed but key to the maintenance of Cold War ideology, the Russian woman and the Negro are not coincidental extras—they are the forces that threaten to disrupt Cold War sociality, the circuits of sentiment that continue to plague *The Bell Jar.*

The question remains: if the two currents represented by the Russian and the Negro, respectively, are poised to capsize conventional readings of *The Bell Jar*, why do these readings continue? Why does the book continue to enjoy such stunning popularity? One answer could lie in the possibility that although the Cold War has ceased, the terms and conditions of its master narratives continue to govern the way we read U.S. women's literature and Plath in particular. It could be argued that the book promotes such misreading, encouraging us to bracket the seemingly extraneous markers of a transnational political

consciousness and drawing us into a force field where author and text merge to the point of irreconcilability. Yet, as I have argued, this is a space dominated by the terms of female containment for which U.S. Cold War women's narratives are famous. Why should we retreat to or take comfort in these captivating terms? I am convinced that we should not.

The Bell Jar may offer a searing indictment of 1950s patriarchal U.S. culture, but it also offers a different or less obvious glimpse of this representation. Borrowing from Chandra Mohanty, the editors of the collection *Between Woman and Nation* have advised that by "[c]ritically reading the spaces between woman and nation as not only structured by patriarchy, we can begin to grasp the supra and transnational aspects of cultures of identity . . . imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but systemic" (Alarcón 13). In order to register these divergent histories and social locations, we must follow the clues the novel provides to signal an engagement beyond a longing for selfhood that depends on the suppression of difference and the false premise of choice as key to female emancipation. The book offers the enticement of national narratives that proffer integrated selfhood as a warning that we may, like Esther, "pretend not to notice" (183). The price we pay for this pretense is a perpetual entrapment in the terms of female containment. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era, where multiculturalism has attached itself to the triumphs of the market, it may be more difficult to summon such alternatives. But if we trace the historical currents of *The Bell Jar*, we may see an eerie preview of the slippery slope premised by "choice" as equivalent to "diversity," an equation of multiculturalism and the market. While a focus on the Negro and the Russian may not lead us to neat and tidy summations of the novel's many strands of consciousness, it does speak back to the picture of domestic female captivity in which Plath's work, and likewise her popularity, seem stymied. Moreover, if we follow what I am calling

the novel's alternative logic, we find that discontinuity, provisionality, and even misunderstanding are part of its transnational gesture—what I have termed the radical imaginary of *The Bell Jar*.

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Notes

1. Plath perpetually appears in contemporary popular media. The female protagonist in the movie *Ten Things I Hate about You* (1999) reads *The Bell Jar*; in an episode of *The Gilmore Girls*, the show's heroine reads Plath's diaries; and rockstar Ryan Adams's song "Sylvia Plath" (2001) testifies to the ongoing obsession of youth culture with Plath.

2. As Gayatri Spivak has written, "[l]iterature contains the element of surprising the historical. But it is also true that a literary text produces the effect of being inevitable; indeed, one might argue that that effect is what provokes reading, as transgression of the text. . . . The representation, seeming inevitable, asks for transgressive readings" (55). Many studies of *The Bell Jar* read the tale as a progressive narrative, a "rite of passage" (Davidson 184). As one recent study contends, "the American girl is *The Bell Jar*'s topic" (Brain 63). However, as *The Bell Jar* instructs us, "the American girl" is not only a dangerous fiction, she is a racialized one. Moreover, there are other gendered fictions complicit with that of the alleged American girl in the 1950s: If "she" is a fiction to be exposed, in its exposure this fiction reveals its dependency on other forms of gendering and supplemental relationships to the state.

3. Jacqueline Rose is the exception when it comes to critical exegesis on Plath. Rose writes, "at the point where [the story of the fig tree in *The Bell Jar*] is still linked to its cultural origins, it signifies not plurality but difference, and the difference not of the sexes, but of race. This is, I would suggest, with all the force of its specific historical reference, one of the crucial subtexts of Plath's fiction writing, and indeed of the whole of her work" (204).

4. Criticism on crucial links between race and the Cold War has also begun to emerge in recent years. See Hixson, Bortstelmann, Von Eschen, and Plummer.

5. *The Bell Jar* suggests that there are at least two sides to a fascination with U.S. Cold War femininity—one, the U.S. side, and the other, the Soviet side. And it's the disjuncture between these—the deception—that the book gestures towards as an aperture or an opening for rethinking the category of "woman." Below I elaborate on this disjuncture with a discussion of Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev's encounter in Moscow during the so-called "Kitchen Debate," but for now I want to continue to stress the text's disorientation of the multiple pasts upon which it draws.

6. For example, the use of "psychological warfare" to describe U.S. State Depart-

ment tactics during the Krushchev "thaw" could be productively compared to the use of correlative strategies Plath describes as deployed to keep women confined.

7. See my elaboration of this relationship in "Between Mother and History: Jean Stafford, Marguerite Oswald, and U.S. Cold War Women's Citizenship."

8. At the end of the novel Esther emerges as if by marionette strings—"guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread," she recalls in entering the interrogation room, the image with which the novel concludes (244).

9. See Ashe.

10. Ross notes that even if their Jewishness was articulated in "politically secular and Americanized terms," Jewishness in the era was "still massively identified in the public mind with unpatriotic behavior" (20-21).

11. Together these goods conformed to the desire to "show them that we make things they don't know about . . . and would be tickled to death to have" (qtd. in Sandeen 134). Representative American families were selected for the exhibition's fashion show. Among them, the Davises, of Milburn, NJ, were chosen as the suburban ideal—Mr. Davis an active leader in the Explorer Scout program and an usher at his Episcopal church; and Mrs. Davis a Sunday school teacher and active PTA member, with three children in tow.

12. While all U.S. reports bear interest, see "Ivan Takes a Look at American Life: Photo Report from Moscow" in *U.S. News and World Report*. For a detailed description of the event from a contemporary perspective, see Hixson.

13. As Marling notes, "The latest in kitchen consumerism stood for the basic tenets of the American way of life. Freedom. Freedom from drudgery for the housewife. And democracy, the opportunity to choose the very best model from the limitless assortment of colors, features and prices the free market had to offer" (243).

14. As Deborah Nelson has explained, "The constitutional right to privacy represents a paradox: it both refused the logic of containment, which justified the intrusion into private life to protect the same privacy; and extended its logic by resting the right to privacy on the exceptional idealization of the home" (80).

15. Indeed since John Steinbeck toured a war-ravaged Russia in 1947 with the photographer Robert Capa in search of what he termed the "great other side of politics"—"There must," he wrote, "be a private life of the Russian people"—the Nixonian axiom that a capitalist attitude towards women was universal provided an enduring model. Steinbeck's search detailed an inability of post-war America to fathom Russia without invoking femininity as a battleground. Like other texts by equally left-leaning authors such as Marguerite Higgins, Margaret Bourke White and Ella Winter, Steinbeck's *Russian Journal* is actively engaged in teaching a new post-war Americanness in which "the Russian woman" as determined by a compulsory relationship to capitalist femininity (aka "the private") figures as key in determining a binary relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. As early as 1943, a focus on the shortcomings and limitations of women abroad—particularly in the U.S.S.R.—became a way of reiterating American national superiority. The fascination with Soviet femininity became especially fashionable in the late 1950s, when numerous articles in the *New York Times*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and elsewhere showcased the dreary attempts of Russians to be real, which is to say consumer-oriented, women.

16. Weddings in Soviet custom had been dressed down and emancipated from the Church. As the *Krokodil* article mused, "Then, suddenly, from behind the partitions entered a young black man and a young black woman, and all the white mannequins began to look upon them with such love that, to tell the truth, we started to get teary-eyed. . . . Apparently, in America, this is never seen. If only they could come here, to the exhibit, and see how the couples embraced one another" (Translation mine, 4). All Russian-to-English translations heretofore are my own.

17. Not only were Cold War fictions dependent upon race, but the woman defined by and privy to the universal compulsion of consumer choice was always a racialized subject. Khrushchev thus positions himself as simultaneously popular and elite—occupying both places at once, his acts of unification and consolidation carried forth by the principle of being "for the ladies."

18. For common stereotyping of the Soviet woman see also "S-x in the Soviet Union": "Sex with a capital *S* could very easily distract citizens from the 'building of communism'" (45), and "Allure, Milady? Try Spirit of Red Moscow."

19. Apparently Plath's own "gams" were featured in a student newspaper in Cambridge when she was studying there on a Fulbright in 1955.

20. Esther next removes herself even further from acting on these partial desires: "Then Constantin and the Russian girl interpreter and the whole bunch of black and white and yellow men arguing down there behind their labeled microphones seemed to move off at a distance. I saw their mouths go up and down without a sound, as if they were sitting on the deck of a departing ship, stranding me in the middle of a huge silence" (75). The self-imposed cocoon of isolation is of course not unlike the "white cocoon" of isolation Esther experiences at Belsize, the asylum where she inaugurates a recovery of sorts. In this scene, Esther is of the world but cut off from it: the world is a transnational one of representative "black and white and yellow men," a departing ship of political engagement. Esther is left in silence and it's unclear if she prefers this world-at-a-distance pose, or if the text derides her naive solipsism which sees "freedom" as escape from the body trapped in its Cold War contradiction. (Esther turns in the next line to recite the "literal" things she can't do, like cook, sew, clean, etc., those mainstays of Cold War femininity.) One critic makes the argument that because Plath underlined the sentence in her copy of Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*, "The lovers, in rejecting life actually win to the most intense life," writing was "'the enduring immanence' she sought to create," and that through writing, she would be ushered into a better life, a "most intense" one (Hammer 77-78). Yet I wonder if we shouldn't read this causal link between Plath's college-age doodlings and *The Bell Jar* otherwise. Surely being removed from the world, engulfed in a "huge silence" is portrayed in an ambiguous light in which a mockery of the urge to disengage from the world, to be caught in that bubble of silence and navel-gazing apathy, is equally apparent.

21. It is worth noting that Plath wrote her senior thesis on the figure of the double in Dostoevsky.

22. See, for example, stories by Maia Ganina, I. Grekova, Liudmila Petrushevskaia and Viktoriia Tokareva.

23. As I explore elsewhere, Natalia Baranskaya's *A Week Like Any Other* (1969) takes up the tensions between national dream of the double as the messianic figure and

the everyday (the feminine banal), portraying a kind of female doubling that resists exclusivity. Navigating female selfhood in *A Week Like Any Other* requires one to contend not only with the false iconography of Soviet womanhood as good mother and good worker but also with the impossibility of ever being able to account for the doubleness within that doubleness.

24. Qtd. in Saunders 4.

25. Esther moves to a place where no one can see her actions below the waist. She doesn't kick him in the groin—that would be too obvious. Rather she goes for the calf. The orderly gets her point, rolling his eyes at her, or playing the role of accommodating the white woman's antics.

26. These others are referenced through numerous racial and ethnic images throughout the novel and include the "big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face" (Esther's own reflection in the elevator after her food poisoning); Dodo Conway, Esther's fecund Catholic neighbor; Mrs. Tomolillo, the Italian American woman Esther witnesses giving birth and then again (falsely) identifies in the asylum; the dark-skinned Dr. "Pancreas"; and Rico, the Peruvian who assaults Esther.

27. "Today American women are awakening to the fact that they have been sold into virtual slavery by a lie invented and marketed by men. One book has named that lie and told women what to do about it," claims the back cover copy of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.

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Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising

Marsha Bryant

Editor's note: This essay was originally published with ten illustrations of advertisements that appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* during the 1950s. The ads could not be reproduced here, but the text describes them clearly; readers who wish to consult them may find them in the following issues: July 1950; November 1951; January, March, and October 1952; October 1956; and February 1957. Other ads in *Ladies' Home Journal* and similar popular magazines of the time also clearly illustrate the points made in Marsha Bryant's essay. — J.M.

Sylvia Plath is not only one of America's major poets, but also literary culture's ultimate commodity. In 1998 she earned a spot in *Time* magazine's special issue, "100 Artists and Entertainers of the Century." More recently, the *New Yorker* ran a full-page blowup of the Plath most ingrained in our collective memory—the smiling, long-legged coed in a white, two-piece swimsuit.[1] Looking like an advertising model instead of a famous poet, this Plath hooks the reader to sample a new and improved product, the *Unabridged Journals*. In this essay, I am less interested in Plath's commodification than I am in the ways her writing prompts new ways of thinking about American advertising and vice versa. Like Plath's confessional poems, ads construct drama through inflated rhetoric and outrageous claims. And like Plath's poems, fifties ads transformed domestic space into a dreamscape of daily miracles. In Plath's "Fever 103°" a delirious speaker ascends from her domestic enclosure with cherubim; in a Baker's Angel Flake ad from 1956, a "coconutty" housewife ascends from her domestic enclosure with cake wings.[2] We tend to view the former image as more artistic and "private" and the latter as more commercial and "public." But both dramatize domesticity by investing the woman with supernatural powers. Moreover, each text's high flying speaker occupies a position some-

where between compulsion and choice—a crucial issue in Plath's work. In advertising, the poet found strategies for creating the direct, immediate language and surreal images that would launch the *Ariel* volume's ascent up the sales charts.

Most critics argue that Plath rebels against cultural norms, but her interactions with advertising extend beyond the stance of parody or satire. In *The Bell Jar*, for example, the protagonist mocks a disc jockey's "white toothpaste ad smile," but she also imagines escaping her awkwardness through the reified "blue light" of a vodka advertisement (1971, 7-8). Writing her mother from Cambridge, Plath declares that she will transform her kitchen into "an ad out of *House and Garden* with Ted's help," hardly the bohemian image we expect from someone seeking to become the female equivalent of W. B. Yeats (1975, 283). *Unabridged Journals* reveals that the poet and her husband entered several ad slogan contests during 1958:

> the Dole pineapple & Heinz ketchup contests close this week, but the French's mustard, fruit-blended oatmeal & Slenderella & Libby-tomato juice contests don't close till the end of May. We stand to win five cars, two weeks in Paris, a year's free food, and innumerable iceboxes & refrigerators and all our debts paid. Glory glory. (Plath 2000, 365)

Anxious about money, Plath frets, "If only by a freak we could win one of those oatmeal-naming contests" (2000, 380). So advertising was very much on her mind as she produced the work that would appear in her first volume, *The Colossus*. Plath did not always perceive advertising to be a "dangerously powerful" force that degrades women, as Janice Markey has claimed (1993, 92). Rather, the poet reiterates and revises, coincides and collides with American advertising and its representations of domesticity.

Garry Leonard has argued perceptively that Plath had a similarly conflicted stance toward beauty products advertised in *Mademoiselle:* "She wishes to speak as a subject against the dehumanizing commod-

ity culture, while at the same time preserving—even improving—her 'feminine' allure as a valuable object within this same culture" (1992, 63). While his analysis assesses advertising images of young women who commodify their bodies for the marriage market, mine focuses on images of housewives who purchase commodities for their homes. In the 1950s, housewives were America's primary consumers, and they chose their products during a period in which "gross annual advertising expenditures quadrupled" (Sivulka 1998, 240). It was also the decade in which the Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debate" proved that household appliances were vital symbols of the American dream. When Plath brought this cultural network into her poetry, she tapped what Robert Von Hallberg has called "the irreducible center of public life" (1985, 4). In other words, advertising may prove Plath more mainstream than we think.

This essay will argue that the rhetoric, images, and mythologies of American advertising prove as crucial as psychological contexts in understanding Plath's construction of domesticity. In the heightened space of magazine and television ads, the postwar "dream house" became increasingly surreal: food could talk, housewives could levitate, appliances could marry. Normalized in the pages of mainstream magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*, this kitchen craziness should prompt us to complicate the claim that Plath's mental illness is the primary factor in what Marjorie Perloff has termed her "peculiar ability to fuse the domestic and the hallucinatory" (1985, 283). My essay will also consider advertisements as a means of rethinking Plath's portrayal of female agency in American consumer culture. For Betty Friedan, ads targeting 1950s housewives disempowered women by confining them to their kitchens, thus excluding them from the larger, patriarchal world. For James B. Twitchell, targeted ads like Miss Clairol's "Does she . . . or doesn't she?" prove more exclusive than excluding; he finds empowering their "knowing implication that excluded men" (2000, 123). My analysis of Plath and advertising seeks a position between these opposing views, arguing that

the women in Plath's poems occupy the ambiguous position of housewife-consumer. I will first note the ways that the ads and poems construct a surreal domesticity, and then examine the gender and economic relations that sustained the crazy kitchen.

Crazy Kitchens on Madison Avenue

Most of the advertisements I will discuss appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, a leading women's magazine with a white, middle-class readership. Friedan calls the *Journal* a "service magazine" because its features addressed women's role as housewives in the 1950s (1983, 52); for example, regular sections covered cooking, decorating, and marriage. Yet the *Journal*'s attention to poetry was rather impressive for a homemaking magazine; as many as 10 poems could appear in a single issue. Moreover, the magazine published poems by John Ciardi, Richard Eberhart, Donald Hall, Randall Jarrell, Galway Kinnell, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Theodore Roethke. Much of the *Journal*'s poetry was not of this caliber, but the inclusion of now canonized poets complicates Friedan's claim that the magazine assumed a "brainless" readership (65). According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Plath "devoured that magazine" during her high school years (1987, 51). She submitted several poems to *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1949 and published one there in 1958. Plath also considered the magazine as a market for her short stories. An avid reader of "my beloved *Journal*" during her final years in England, Plath wrote of her eagerness to try the "exotic" recipes—most of which appeared within advertisements (1975, 455). As she told her mother, the magazine provided "an Americanness which I feel a need to dip into" (433). Plath's engagement with the *Journal* proves as significant as her engagement with *Mademoiselle*, which shaped *The Bell Jar.* Because *Ladies' Home Journal* is not so enmeshed in the crises of Plath's life, it prompts interpretations that are more culturally than biographically invested. As we shall see, the magazine's often surreal images of domestic life would reappear in Ariel's kitchen, thus

challenging standard claims of "a fake, *Ladies' Home Journal* Sylvia" (Heller 2000, 30).

On Madison Avenue, the kitchen was a magical site of miracles and transformations. "Magic" was, in fact, a prominent word in ads for a variety of 1950s kitchen products, from food items to cleaning powders. When cooking, the middle-class housewife could enliven her meals through the "Sunday Dinner Magic" of Hunt's Tomato Sauce, "the magic spoonful" of McCormick's vanilla extract, or the "Red Magic" of Heinz 57 soups. While she didn't pull a rabbit out of a hat, she could open the "helping hand in every can" of Dole fruit. Cleaning up was a snap with S.O.S. "Magic Scouring Pads," or the "blue-magic action" of Blue Dutch Cleanser. And after she washed her dishes, she could renew her hands with the "Skin Magic" of Mennen lotion. In short, these products transformed the housewife into a kitchen magician. But cooking and cleaning were only part of her magic act. She could levitate herself by opening a box of River or Carolina rice, becoming a domestic version of Hermes in an excerpt from a 1955 ad. She could fly like a jet if she made junket fudge (the "world's fastest"), or like an angel if she used Sucaryl artificial sweetener. She could make dishes fly if she used Lux liquid, as can be seen in a 1956 ad. She could even turn her children into "eager beavers" by feeding them Big Top peanut butter. While such ads didn't exactly objectify or degrade women, they did place housewives in an otherworldly dimension.

Through her magician status, the 1950s housewife became a suitable companion for a variety of strange beings that inhabited—or visited—her kitchen. Greeting her each morning were the genie from Wish-Bone Salad dressing, the Brownie on the Betty Crocker mix, the sprite on the Philco "Quick-Chef" oven, and the "Minute Minder Man" in appliance timing devices. Thus postwar culture continued what Roland Marchand calls "the 're-personalization' of life through advertising" in which "inanimate things come alive" (1985, 358). Marchand discusses the invention of corporate personae such as Betty Crocker during the modernist period. Their presence in radio and

print advertisements prompted voluminous—and often intimate—mail from consumers (356). But the 1950s housewife did something decidedly odder—she bypassed the corporate intercessor and interacted directly with her kitchen companions. In a graphic from a 1953 Lux ad, the Minute Minder Man and his adoring user have a love relationship. The Jolly Green Giant gives a cooking demonstration to a pleasantly surprised housewife in an ad from 1952; note how the combination of photographic and drawn images blurs boundaries between real and fictive space in this kitchen. And lest we think that housewives are "seeing things" or are just plain crazy—a 1952 ad includes a husband to verify that Elsie the Borden cow is "really" there. Fifties television ads also employed male presences both to construct and verify the domestic surreal. Invisible men addressed aproned women in their kitchens, telling them to use Anacin, Gleem, or Quaker's Oats. In the context of advertising, hearing voices and having visions were perfectly normal household activities.

Not all ads for 1950s kitchen products were surreal, of course, but the motifs I have sketched here reflect a consistent trend that spanned the decade. They also raise intriguing questions that prove relevant to Plath's construction of domesticity and female agency. Did magical products such as "self-washing" Dreft detergent simply continue the cultural myth of labor-saving conveniences? Karal Ann Marling notes that convenience foods such as fruit cocktail "seemed to demand ever more elaborate decorative forms of presentation," while Friedan asserts that "each labor-saving appliance brought a labor-demanding elaboration of housework" (Marling 1994, 225; Friedan 1983, 240). Were the powerful illusions in these ads, then, signs of the housewife's illusory powers? Were they dressing up drudgery? The kitchen magician figure also prompts other kinds of questions. To what extent is domestic surreality an expression of women's experience, and to what extent is it a performance? Who was the kitchen magician's audience, and how does her daily act pressure public/private boundaries? Did crazy kitchens cut women off from reality, as Friedan believes, or did

they enable them to refashion it? Like domestic space in Plath's poems, Madison Avenue's kitchen constructs a space between real and surreal, labor and magic, authenticity and performance.

Plath's most famous volume, *Ariel*, mixes the magical properties and hyperbolic situations of advertising with her own brand of kitchen craziness. From the hissing potatoes in "Lesbos" to the mutating thumb in "Cut," Plath's volatile domestic scenes were as attuned to American consumer culture as they were to her disintegrating relationship with Ted Hughes. Like ads, these poems give the sense that the housewife in her kitchen is never really alone. In "A Birthday Present," a woman measures flour and perceives the presence of a supernatural being: "When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking" (1981, 206); the phrase even has the jingle of an ad slogan. Plath also mimics ads by constructing strange relationships between people and appliances. In "An Appearance" and "The Applicant," men court mechanical women. But these love objects aren't *in* the machines like the Minute Minder Man; they *are* the machines. The first poem gives new life to the cliché of electrifying love: "The smile of iceboxes annihilates me./ Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one!/ I hear her great heart purr" (189). This paean to a refrigerator captures the "thrill" that modern appliances supposedly brought to the American dream kitchen. In addition, Plath exposes the contradiction of "repersonalizing" gender relations that are already mechanized—an issue to which I will return in my discussion of "The Applicant."

Like ads, Plath explores performative as well as mechanical dimensions of domesticity. She draws the reader into the intimate spaces of the home (kitchen, bedroom, nursery), only to reveal a stage. In "Lesbos," for example, two housewives converse in a kitchen that is "all Hollywood," complete with "stage curtains" (1981, 227). The addressee once "acted for the thrill" in Tinsel Town and New York. Her new, domestic role recalls Joan Crawford's fifties makeover as a mop-toting mother (Coontz 1992, 28). In *Ariel*, woman's self-portrayal can reach the level of pure theater, as we see in the opening lines of "Cut":

What a thrill—
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin, a flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp. . . .
(Plath 1981, 235)

As its third line suggests, this poem indeed goes *over the top* with its Red Magic act. Out of the opened thumb, "a million soldiers" overrun any kitchen sprites that might be lurking in cans, bottles, or appliances. Moreover, the thumb assumes a number of gender-bending character roles: a "little pilgrim" (echoing John Wayne), a "Kamikaze man," and a girl in a babushka. "Trepanned veteran" of the speaker's own kitchen wars, the bloody thumb attests to the inherent violence of food preparation. As food critic Betty Fussell writes in her recent memoir, a woman enters the kitchen prepared to "do battle, deploying a full range of artillery—crushers, scrapers, beaters, roasters, gougers, grinders . . ." (1999, 4). Such violence was latent in Madison Avenue's kitchen, although there are notable exceptions. For example, cartoons from Brillo ads depicted a "fighting mad" housewife battling a pan in 1950, and the pan's counter-attack in 1952. In one of the more bizarre television ads from the fifties, we learn that Quaker Puffed Wheat and Puffed Rice taste good because they are "the only cereals shot from guns."[3] So Ariel's kitchen was hardly anomalous in giving "mealtime adventures" a menacing edge, pushing domesticity into mythic domain.

What's in a Brand Name?

Plath wrote her first mature poems at the same time Roland Barthes assessed advertising as one of French culture's everyday "mythologies." For postmodern American writers, advertising offered a means of reconfiguring the modernist paradigm of history, myth, and self. In the perpetual *now* of ads, instantaneousness renders obsolete T. S. Eliot's cumulative historical sense. Fungible consumer goods render irrelevant the monumental qualities that modernists valued. Postwar American culture also provided branded mythic figures for domestic adventure; unlike James Joyce's wandering urban Ulysses, the Jolly Green Giant and Elsie the Borden cow came straight to your suburban kitchen. Genies unleashed the magic of Woolite soap and Wishbone salad dressing, and Lees took suburban families on magic carpet rides. Through the magical powers of miracle products, consumers could attain mythical attributes within the confines of domestic space and the nuclear family. For the self-mythologizing Confessionals, advertising offered secular myths as potent as Freud's. Brand names such as Triscuits (Lowell), Bab-O (Sexton), and Ovaltine (Plath) could grant talismanic status to mundane household objects in their poems. As Twitchell puts it, advertising assumes religion's role of "adding meaning to objects" (2000, 13), and Plath goes further than her peers in bringing the resonance of advertising into postwar American poetry.

The title poem of Plath's first volume, *The Colossus*, shows how advertising mythologies shape Plath's construction of domesticity and complicate the issue of female agency. Like "The Disquieting Muses," this poem inserts a branded product from mass culture into a mythical framework from high culture, but the speaker of "The Colossus" exercises more control over the product she consumes. In the earlier poem, the speaker recalls the "cookies and Ovaltine" her mother offered to calm the children during a hurricane. While the brand name reflects motherly nurture, the product becomes one of her many failures to alleviate her child's growing anxiety. In "The Colossus," the speaker makes her own choice—Lysol—for the task of rehabilitating a giant

"historical" figure she addresses as "father." Both a decayed monument and a "littered" landscape, the father figure is the space that Plath's speaker has inhabited "thirty years now." In the poem's initial words *I shall never*, Plath renders ambiguous the speaker's degree of agency—a feature we find in other poems of domesticity. Defeated and deliberate, the speaker declares that her labor will remain unfinished: "I shall never get you put together entirely,/ Pieced, glued, and properly jointed" (1981, 129). Is her labor, then, a choice (like Lysol), or a compulsion (like housewifery)?

Sandra Gilbert articulates critical consensus on this 1959 poem in the *Voices and Visions* video series, stating that the speaker is "enclosed in the kind of patriarchal history" that the Colossus-father represents (1988). This position establishes clear gender and power boundaries that diminish the speaker's agency. While Gilbert's interpretation certainly clarifies Plath's more academic images such as the "Roman Forum" (a site of patriarchal state and literary power), it doesn't quite fit the cultural meanings that Lysol occupied in the 1950s. As a product for use in the home, Lysol invokes an indoor *feminine* space that both reinforces and resists patriarchal power:

> Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
> I crawl like an ant in mourning
> Over the weedy acres of your brow
> To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
> The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.
>
> (Plath 1981, 129)

Plath creates a space that is both outside and inside—a suitable position from which to utter a poem that is, at one level, a public mourning of her own father. It is also a space that allows the speaker to domesticate the father-landscape through her repeated labors.

The speaker's self-presentation within this space contributes to the poem's ambivalent representation of female agency. Ladder scaling

seems adventuresome, while crawling ant-like does not. Plath's Lilliputian image intersects with advertising's domestic adventures, as seen in a 1951 ad for Murray ovens. In the upper portion, tiny people scale a colossal gas range and marvel at its modern features. The ad creates a space that is both domestic and foreign with its slogan, "Let's take a Cook's Tour of Murray Ranges!"; the pun relates food preparation to mass tourism by invoking the 19th-century travel agency. If we examine the tiny figures, we see that male "tour" guides accompany groups of women dressed for an excursion; one woman even carries an umbrella. The ad copy continues the work of blurring indoor/outdoor space by describing the smooth contours of the range's "famous 'Waterfall' front," thus enlarging the realm of domesticity while diminishing the world outside.

The speaker's size may be diminutive, but Lysol dramatizes her labor so that it looms as large as the Colossus himself. We could read this paradox as a further sign of the speaker's entrapment in patriarchy, drawing on Friedan's shrewd observation that in the 1950s, "housework not only expanded to fill the time available, but could hardly be done in the available time" (1983, 241). In other words, Plath's speaker is condemned to a life of drudgery. While we cannot ignore the subordinate role of unpaid housework within American capitalism (and patriarchy), we also cannot overlook Lysol's status as an agent of purifying violence. Using gluepots "to mend" skull-plates would restore the father, but using Lysol to "clear" his eyes would blind him. In *Mythologies*, Barthes notes that ammonia- and chlorine-based cleaning fluids signify "a kind of absolute fire, a savior" through their myth of "a violent, abrasive modification of matter" (1987, 36). If, as Plath writes, "more than a lightning-stroke" from Zeus is required "to create such a ruin" as the Colossus, then the poem's speaker requires the most powerful mythic product to transform it (1981, 130). "Now 'Lysol' needs no poison label," claimed a 1954 ad in *Good Housekeeping*, even though it has "up to 30 times more disinfectant power than bleaches." In a 1956 ad from *Ladies' Home Journal*, Lysol is the housewife's "shield," "defender," "ally," and "friend" who will do the "dirty work"

of *killing* odors and *attacking* dirt. Plath's brand cleans more aggressively than its competitors. Clorox emphasized its capacity for "gentler bleaching," while Jet Bon Ami provided "lacy froth" in an aerosol bottle. Lysol also gives its user more control than the latter product. In the ad for Jet Bon Ami, the housewife appears to be a floating zombie who can "fly through housework" with her eyes closed, an unusual attribute among her levitating peers. But Plath's speaker must see clearly if she is to disinfect her father's vision. As she performs her domestic labor, she chooses a product that renders her more active (*shield*, *ally*) than passive (*defender*), more equal (*friend*) than subordinate. By restoring the meanings of Lysol to the poem, we see how Plath's engagement with advertising furthers, rather than hinders, the poet's interrogations of gender and power. Mainstream images from popular magazines were crucial sources of her emerging poetic voice.

Falling in Love with Appliances

In "The Applicant," Plath explores larger social relationships that sustain consumer culture as she continues to negotiate gender and domesticity. Like "The Colossus," this poem assesses female agency through the consumer-product relationship, but Plath shifts the power relations from daughter/father to wife/husband. The woman in "The Applicant" is herself a "marvelous product" pitched by "a sort of exacting super-salesman," as Plath explained in her BBC broadcast of 1962 (1981, 293); he is also a marriage broker. Through diction and pacing, Plath gives her male speaker the straightforward relentlessness of the Hard Sell technique, perfected in the 1950s by influential adman Rosser Reeves. The poem's title refers to a young man who would like to qualify for purchase. Essentially, Plath has overlaid consumer and erotic triangles in which the machine/housewife passes from one male to another. According to standard interpretations of this poem, both triangles demean the woman by reducing her to the purely mechanical level of her domestic labors.

She is indeed a household servant, but her various feats would put even the tireless Reddy Kilowatt to shame. If we reexamine the poem, we find that this very quality diminishes her "alarmingly defective" buyer/husband as well (Markey 1993, 85). While the product has "nothing wrong with it," Plath writes, the Applicant proves to be a rather pathetic figure who the salesman finds sorely lacking:

> First, are you our sort of a person?
> Do you wear
> A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
> A brace or a hook,
> Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
>
> Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
> How can we give you a thing?
> Stop crying.
> Open your hand.
> Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
>
> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.
> Will you marry it?
>
> (Plath 1981, 221)

Ironically, the salesman faults the Applicant for not being needy *enough*. Selling young men's need for wholeness as much as the product/wife, the salesman assumes that his buyer must have "something missing." Plath reinforces the idea of incompleteness by ending each of these opening stanzas with a sentence that continues into the next one; only the poem's final stanza is autonomous. Her images of surgery and gender-bending prosthetics present a decidedly freakish image of young men on the marriage market. They also reverse the

hetero-normative rhetoric of 1950s marriage expert Paul Landis: "Except for the sick, the badly crippled, the deformed, the emotionally warped and the mentally defective, almost everyone has an opportunity to marry" (qtd. in Miller and Nowak 1977, 154). In the economy of Plath's poem, only those whose "crotch" has become some kind of "crutch" make suitable husbands.

If the Applicant is no freak, the salesman is assured nonetheless of his inadequacies. The command "Stop crying" shows that the Applicant has lost control of himself, something that *women* were expected to do. In two of Reeves's television ads for Anacin, for example, a matronly neighbor and a young mother lose their tempers and take the painkiller to be "in control again," as the announcer puts it. Plath's Applicant will gain control over his product once he buys it, but his ability to maintain self-control appears doubtful. As the poem continues, the salesman observes that the Applicant is both "stark naked" and mentally challenged:

> Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
> I have the ticket for that.
> Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
> Well, what do you think of that?
> (Plath 1981, 221)

This second reference to the Applicant's emptiness underscores his lack, as does the last stanza's analogy of the husband-hole and wife-poultice. In the salesman's final pitch, the product becomes the Applicant's "only hope," and the repeated question becomes a command: "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it." Employing what Twitchell calls "the power of threes," the poem's speaker completes his Hard Sell (2000, 151). Anacin works fast Fast FAST. The housewife-machine "can talk, talk, talk" (Plath 2000, 222). After the transaction is finished, the woman has been sold and the man has been shamed.

What of the poem's "marvelous product" and her ambiguous

agency of being "willing" to obey the Applicant's commands? To what extent is Plath reinforcing 1950s norms, and to what extent is she revising them? In answering these questions, my students and I have turned to ads for major home appliances. Surely Plath had large kitchen appliances in mind when she designed her housewife-machine. Ranges and refrigerators dominated the full-page ads in *Ladies' Home Journal*, and copywriters extolled them as "fabulous" (Westinghouse electric range), "sensational" (Philco Duplex refrigerator) and full of "wonders" and "miracles" (modern gas ranges). The vacuum cleaners and sewing machines that Plath invokes in the poem were also pitched with dramatic claims, but major kitchen appliances occupied a more hyperbolic—and surreal—realm. Lilliputian families gaze in wonder at a colossal Hotpoint refrigerator in an ad from 1950 (anticipating the Murray "Cook's Tour" ad), and the proud owners of Frigidaire appliances become Queens by the end of the decade. Moreover, these "smartest" of appliances offer the starkest contrast with the empty-headed Applicant. By the mid-1950s, as Juliann Sivulka notes, appliance manufacturers promoted "sophisticated new push-button gadgetry designed to activate unseen machinery" instead of the "obvious labor-saving benefits" of their products (1998, 246). In the early 1950s, ads for the Caloric gas range claimed that the product was "So AUTOMATIC it almost thinks for me." Later in the decade, Frigidaire ads hailed the "Thinking Panels" on the 1956 range, and "the '*thinkingest*' ranges yet devised" in 1957. This was, after all, the era of the fully "automatic" kitchen where food preparation was not strictly active or passive, human or mechanical.

When we factor this context into Plath's poem, the issue of the housewife-machine's agency becomes rather complicated. She does the thinking for her apparently brainless user, but she also responds automatically to his voice commands. She is fully loaded ("a living doll" that "works"), while he remains vacant. He buys her, and she consumes his income. She will outperform and outlive him, but will die of grief when he is gone. And she will apparently outperform any house-

hold appliance on the market by accruing value over time: "Naked as paper to start/ But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,/ In fifty, gold" (1981, 221). Plath's allusions to traditional anniversary gifts position the "marvelous product" within the confines of lifelong marriage, an institution supposedly "built to last" in the 1950s (as one of my students put it). But Plath also positions the housewife-machine outside the short trajectory of planned obsolescence, manufacturers' major strategy for encouraging consumer spending. The Applicant, too, falls outside consumer norms because as historian Elaine Tyler May states, "it was the homemaker's responsibility" to purchase household goods (1988, 167). Therefore, Plath has feminized the Applicant by placing him in a position reserved for housewives. Husband and wife, consumer and product, are entangled so that power relations become less clear.

We can see a similar imbrication of heterosexual marriage and appliance consumption in two magazine ads from the fifties. Each presents a kitchen appliance as an ideal husband or wife, and each is addressed to a woman consumer. The ad for Gibson refrigerators appeared in a 1950 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, a magazine that Plath considered another possible market for her short stories. Like Plath's poem, this ad equates appliance buying with matrimony: "It's like getting MARRIED you should get well acquainted first!" Like a model husband, the refrigerator is a "Good Provider" whose "Little Kindnesses" will enrich her life, as we see in the sidebar's enumeration of major selling points. This wonder product cannot match the housewife-machine's range of skills, but it can offer a household income ("pays you pennies a day"). So the ad's central analogy links the woman's control of her appliance (via the "Pres-Toe" door opener) with her control of her husband's money. As Barbara Ehrenreich has written, "what was at stake for women in the battle of the sexes was, crudely put, a claim on some man's wage" (1983, 2). The Gibson ad reinforces this fifties "breadwinner ethic" with its cartoon of a smiling housewife depositing a coin in a piggy bank. But if the Gibson-guy is being played for a sucker, the

housewife appears to play the servant role in the ad's largest visual. Like her appliance, she faces the viewer while presenting food and drink; the shadowy male figure to her left has taken a glass from her tray. What, then, is this ad's ultimate take on the homemaker-breadwinner relationship? That the wife, positioned between husband and appliance, views them as interchangeable economic assets? That the wife, not the husband, is the *real* household appliance? Pamela Annas's comment on "The Applicant" is relevant here: "However this system got started, both men and women are implicated in its perpetuation" (1980, 172). Like Plath's poem, the Gibson ad reveals cultural contradictions in the breadwinner-homemaker relationship, as well as the consumer-product relationship.

The second ad presents a mechanical "woman" to replace housewives in their key role of preparing the evening meal. Like Plath's housewife-machine, Frigidaire's '57 electric range reconciles opposing traits; it is both an intelligent machine and a glamorous cook. This example comes from the Sheer Look campaign, launched in December of 1956 to promote Frigidaire kitchen and laundry appliances. It appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* and is the source of the epithet "the thinkingest ranges," discussed above. In its central image, the ad shows an elegantly dressed woman standing next to a streamlined range; her gesture mimics the "sheer" angles of Frigidaire's new design. Framed by the headline, the two models embody the ad's central comparison of a smart appliance with a beautiful woman: "Meet the perfect cook with the new Sheer Look!" Yet on further examination, the ad shows the "strain" of the industry's "insistent glamorization" of the American housewife, to use Friedan's terms (1983, 65). The ad copy suggests that the product's competing qualities are unusual in a range, but impossible in a woman: "You'd hardly expect a range as stunning as this to be a marvelous cook. . . . And these wonderful ranges have beauty to match their brains." Contradicting these claims is the small photo beneath the copy, a close-up of an aproned housewife placing a dish in the oven. Though she is bare-armed (more

"sheer"?), she isn't sexy like the model (whose gloved gesture resembles a stripper's). Dismembered into torso and arms by the framing, this housewife is literally incomplete (unlike Plath's housewife-machine). And she, not the model, most resembles the ad's target audience. If beauty and brains combine in the Frigidaire, they could be incompatible traits for 1950s women—a dilemma Plath explores at length in *The Bell Jar*. Moreover, they were traits that often proved difficult for Plath to balance in her early poems. In April 1958, she singles out as her preferred work "The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles" because "they have that good lyrical *tension*: crammed speech and music at once, brain and beautiful body at once" (2000, 371). In December of that year, her poem "Second Winter" appeared in the *Journal*, along with an ad for the even "more beautiful" Sheer Look Frigidaire of 1959, "the most feminine refrigerator ever." The housewife who chose the Sheer Look was buying an image of wholeness as well as an appliance, just as her male counterpart did in "The Applicant." For her, Frigidaire's mechanical woman was an empowering image.

Plath wrote "The Applicant" on the day that "marked the end of her marriage," as biographer Paul Alexander points out, and much of the poem's bitterness undoubtedly reflects this event (1991, 299). But as we have seen, the poem's ambiguities reflect the larger issue of domestic woman's complex position in consumer culture. As "the chief customers of American business" in the postwar years, as Friedan puts it, housewives were crucial players in the economic boom (1983, 207). May also points out their considerable buying power: "In the five years after World War II, consumer spending increased 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent" (May 1988, 165). So falling in love with appliances meant consumer clout and housewifely subservience, free choice and automatic living, upward mobility and domestic confinement. If we consider these multiple affiliations that Plath factors into her domestic poems, we must complicate standard debates that position women as either rebels or victims. Plath's poems reflect the contradictions of a male-

dominated industry that depended on women consumers, and the complexities of texts that both reflected and shaped women's desires.

From A. Alvarez to David Yezzi, male critics have characterized Plath's poems with words I find equally appropriate for the domestic spectacles in 1950s advertising—*extreme*, *hysterical*. Like Alan Sinfield, I believe that we should connect what "seems violent and hysterical" in her writing to "its structural grounding" in gender roles and other cultural institutions (1989, 210). In my recent teaching of Plath, I have used 1950s advertising to emphasize cultural, rather than psychological, sources for the craziness we encounter in Ariel's kitchen. For example, I show a television ad for Hotpoint ovens when we discuss "The Applicant" and *The Bell Jar*, and the Ajax "white tornado" ad when we discuss domestic surreality. My students debate whether Plath's kitchen is a site of rebellion or entrapment, drawing on the rich meanings that kitchens had in 1950s consumer culture. I also incorporate advertising into paper assignments, asking students to assess the ways an individual magazine ad intersects with such 1950s frameworks as professionalized homemaking, suburbia, and the breadwinner/housewife relationship. For term papers, I give students the option of comparing Plath and Madison Avenue's visions of domesticity. My students' questions about the ads they discover begin to mirror their questions about the poems they read. Does the hyperbole speak to housewifely fulfillment, or mask its emptiness? Does the dream kitchen express or stage women's desires? Does domesticity fuel or inhibit women's creativity? Biographical contexts remain fascinating to students, but the commodity of Plath's life can restrict her poems to the marginal "extreme" instead of the cultural mainstream. So instead of fixating on why Plath placed her head in a gas oven, we might consider what brand it was and how it was advertised.

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Notes

I would like to thank my graduate student Derek Merrill and my undergraduate students Melissa Bartalos and Emily Carman for their insightful work on Plath and consumer culture. I am also grateful to my research assistants, Huei-Ju Wang and Christina Locke.

1. See the articles "Artists and Entertainers of the 20th Century" in *Time*, 8 June 1998, 115; and "Journals" in *New Yorker*, 27 March 2000, 104-115.

2. The ad appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1956.

3. This ad is included in the video *Commercial Mania* (1986, 60 min.), produced by Johnny Legend and distributed through Rhino (RNVD 2915).

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The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

E. Miller Budick

The situation of women in the modern world is clearly a major concern of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (see Allen 160-78 and Whittier 127-46). Less obvious is how the book might embody a feminist aesthetic, that is, how it might define, as a solution to the sociological and psychological problems of women, a language and an art competent to secure women, especially the female writer, against male domination. In her essay on "Women's Literature," Elizabeth Janeway suggests that to be distinct from men's literature women's literature must constitute "an equally significant report from another, equally significant, area of existence" (344-45). Hence, some of the major themes of women's literature: madness, powerlessness, betrayal and victimization. Though not exclusively feminine, nonetheless these situations frequently arise from the situation of women as women (Janeway 346). Equally important to women's literature, however, is a unique literary language and form. Marjorie Perloff's "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice,'" for example, focuses in Laingian terms on *The Bell Jar*'s "attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self . . . so that a real and viable identity can come into existence" (102). It touches on many female issues. The title itself expresses a female motif. But it does not establish a specifically feminist context. As Erica Jong puts it, "the reason a woman has greater problems becoming an artist is because she has greater problems becoming a self" (qtd. in Reardon 136), which means not just integrating the masked self and the genuine self, but also, as Joan Reardon explains in her analysis of Jong, "in coming to terms with her own body," expressing herself in her "own diction . . . images and symbols" (136).[1]

In her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism*, and in her two contributions to the volume, Elaine Showalter describes how, in recent years, attention has shifted from the treatment of women in male fic-

tion to the reconsideration of the act of writing and what feminist critics have variously called the "politics of language" (Furman), "sexual poetics" (Gilbert 31), or "sexual politics" (Rigney). Feminist critics, argues Showalter, have recognized not only that "women writers had a literature of their own, whose historical and thematic coherence, as well as artistic importance, had been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture," but, more radically, that there existed a "female aesthetic . . . that came out of a specific female psychology." French feminist criticism especially has emphasized "writing in the feminine," "a radically disruptive and subversive kind of writing" that is "connected to the rhythms of the female body and to sexual pleasure" (*New Feminist* 5-6, 9; cf. Jones, "Inscribing" and "Writing").

In the following pages I will argue that Plath not only perceives the world in terms of competing male and female languages, but that she herself attempts to write in the feminine. The text precisely locates the sources of what Susan Coyle has labeled Esther's "alienation" from language (163; cf. Aird 91). And it points toward the need for a female language that can overcome that alienation. Plath does more than construct her novel out of uniquely female experiences concerning specifically female themes. She creates a literary form that simultaneously reflects the inherent femininity of a woman's experience and then transforms that reflection from a static, potentially suffocating presentation of archetypes or traditional images of femaleness into a dynamic process of feminist discourse. Resisting the dangerous lure of the womb-like consciousness and desire for retreat that may well inhere in female sexuality, and to which her text gives full expression, Plath avoids some of the major pitfalls of traditional female writing. She spins a self-propelling and other-directed "thread" (258) of discourse that is sexually aggressive as well as procreative. Plath's text, I believe, demonstrates a pattern of artistic growth whereby intuitive and spontaneous, self-protective, and often self-destructive forms of female response are converted into an independent aesthetic sufficiently strong not only to withstand the pressures of the dominant male language but

finally able to reestablish relations with the male world, from which female writing must take its own birth.

The text carefully prepares for the moment of literary crisis and its aftermath: first, by raising the possibility that male domination is as much a factor of control over language as of sociological or physical power; second, by having Esther react to the threat of male language through an archetypically female process of withdrawal; and finally, by structuring a narrative both imitating and thus legitimizing the pattern of retreat but also initiating a program of discourse that is the opposite of retreat. This discourse eschews escape (and escapism) and recommits itself to language and art. The universe of Plath's novel is, from the outset, explicitly sexist, expressing and advancing its sexuality through language. Physics and chemistry are closely identified with the powerful male teacher in the all female college, whose textbook is "written . . . to explain physics to college girls" (36) and whose language represents a painful condescension to women. He has the authority to reduce them, not to mention the physical universe, to the status of scientific experiments; if the experiment is successful, "he would try to have it published" (36). The physics teacher represents the universe's masculine principles, articulated in a masculine language. This language, "shrinking everything into letters and numbers," abbreviates, restricts, and reduces the universe into physical principles: "let a equal acceleration and let *t* equal time." It takes "all the perfectly good words like gold and silver and cobalt and aluminum [and shortens them] to ugly abbreviations with different decimal numbers after them." Physics and chemistry control the universe through "equal signs" and "formulas." Like the male Mr. *Man*zi (we do not know if Esther's college botany teacher was a man or a woman, but Esther does not identify the teacher as a male),[2] they are "tight" little subjects, holding diminutive "wooden" objects in their minuscule grip. And like the "scorpion" shape of Mr. Manzi's letters (and later the "mosquito" sound of his voice), their potency is phallic, a sting that may not impregnate but wound (Mr. Manzi writes with "special red chalk," asso-

ciating his writing with blood and perhaps foreshadowing Esther's hemorrhage after her first sexual encounter). Chemistry and physics cause her mind to go "dead," her language to become as reductive as their own—the "straight A," shades of the scarlet letter, which marks (H)Esther's relationship to these subjects.[3] "The day I went into physics class it was death," she writes (36).

The problem posed by physics and chemistry is *not* the old science versus humanities dilemma. Rather, it is a tension between what Plath views as vital and life-sustaining structures that express themselves in a feminine discourse, and life-denying forces that speak their own distinctive, male, language. The "diagrams" and "sex cycle[s]," the "heart shaped" "leaf shapes," "holes," and "enlarged diagrams" of botany (36-37), for example, image an opening into and protective containing of life that is archetypically feminine. They provide a mode of conveying life's dimensions that functions, not through formulae and assertions of equivalence, but through pictorial depictions which shape and diagram and even enlarge and which issue in "fascinating" words such as "carotene and xanthophyll" (37). Because this language shares with Esther an essential femininity, it speaks directly to her, stimulating and feeding her imaginative life: "for a while I toyed with the idea of being a botanist and studying the wild grasses in Africa or the South American rain forests" (35).

Esther's immediate response to the killing letter of male language is the first element in the feminist form that Plath presents as the strategy of a feminist literature. Quite simply, Esther retreats from the male language, "escaping" (36) the course requirement for chemistry, and then escaping while auditing the class to a realm antithetical to it: "I shut [Mr. Manzi's] voice out of my ears by pretending it was only a mosquito in the distance and sat back enjoying the bright lights and the coloured fires and wrote page after page of villanelles and sonnets" (38). Esther retreats from the language that abbreviates and shrinks and kills, to a language that, like the language of botany, breathes fascination and sustains life. She immerses herself in villanelles and sonnets

which, in their complex metaphoricity, represent retreat from the concrete, abbreviated world of physics and chemistry and which create the "real" through images and depictions and processes that never attempt to fix meaning or impale it. Esther does not understand that literary language can also be male or female. But even male literary language resembles botany more than physics and chemistry and is preferable to the physical sciences.

This process of retreat from the male to the female language, itself a form or shape of response that in botanical fashion contains and protects, characterizes many of Esther's responses in the early part of the book. And it enters the text in the same process of retreat that Esther enacts. The sequence about college is enfolded in the text as a memory related to the narrative frame, Esther's conversation with Jay Cee, which is likewise embedded as a recollection within the *Ladies' Day* luncheon. Esther's reactions, and the scenes describing them, in other words, are related not by precise links of equation, but, as it were, botanically, as "heart-shaped" diagrams of her psychological and emotional situation. But whereas Esther's responses are largely intuitive, self-protective, and finally self-destructive, leading inexorably to the ultimate retreat, suicide, Plath's text is fully controlled and purposeful. The difference between Esther's story and Plath's is the difference between a biological feminism and a literary one. With no training in the language of her own femininity, Esther cannot interpret her female process and convert it into meaningful discourse. "I don't know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my mind there in Jay Cee's office," she confesses (39). Nor does she understand why the Jay Cee/college memory sequence comes to mind during the *Ladies' Day* luncheon. Furthermore, while Esther thinks her evasions are "successful," in each case the escape represents a "lie" (32 and 35) that catapults her into still another fraudulent retreat. Unrecognized and therefore unrevised duplications of each other, the repeated escapes fail to yield insight and self-knowledge.

Esther's college, Jay Cee, and *Ladies' Day* all represent female envi-

ronments that ought to have provided Esther with the language and identity she seeks. But each has abnegated authority, either by allowing male language to infect and dominate female expression or by giving up on expression altogether. Each, therefore, contributes to the ultimately self-annihilating distortion of Esther's basic instincts, rendering them voiceless cries of help.

Jay Cee's culpability is instructive. As a woman, Jay Cee represents the potential for female discourse. Her office is filled with "potted plants, shelf after shelf of them, springing up at her back like a tropical garden" (32). Jay Cee might well speak the botanical language. But Jay Cee abbreviates her identity, her initials substituting for a name. With her "brutal promptitude" and shrunken eclipse of language ("Jay Cee Here"), she speaks a man's language and represents a man's aesthetic (31). Jay Cee represents the path that many women, including women writers, have chosen. Writes Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, "The feminists' urge to break away from the yoke of biological femininity also expressed itself as a wish to be male" (192). "You'll never get anywhere like that," Jay Cee warns Esther; "What languages do you have?" (34). Esther's response to Jay Cee's question mirrors her earlier college reaction. On the one hand, she pretends to conform to the world's demands: she promises to learn this masculine language of her younger brother and of her dead father, from "some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia." She knows that it is the language for which her mother is "stoned" (34). She recognizes it as a language of death that makes her mind "shut like a clam" (echoing the power of physics to make her mind go dead) and which "barbed-wire"—like threatens to assault her (34; the word "barbed" recalls the phallic threat of the "scorpion" and "mosquito" associated with chemistry and physics). But she promises anyway. On the other hand, she withdraws from her promise (35). Esther's retreat is a running blind. She apes precisely the language she so abhors ("I'll see what I can do. I probably might just fit in one of those double-barrelled, accelerated courses in elementary German they've rigged" [35]). And she de-

scends into the memory of a similarly wounding and self-deceptive escape that, inexplicable to her, provides no redress to her present situation.

Esther looks to Jay Cee as a source of a female language through which she can enter into meaningful discourse with the world. She wishes Jay Cee were her mother and believes that if she were all of her problems would be solved. But Jay Cee is only another version of female submission. She is the masculine in female disguise. She knows "languages," but only to edit them. She is not herself a source of language. It is not surprising that it is impossible for Esther "to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband" (6); nor is it odd that Jay Cee should cause Esther to recognize her "real father" (34) or that Esther should see Mr. Manzi emerging from the back of Jay Cee's head, coming out of the "hat" (39) with which both are associated. Like Esther's real mother, the language Jay Cee teaches is a male-oriented shorthand that reduces Esther to the same abbreviated, fragmented sense of self ("Ee Gee" [40]) with which physics and chemistry threaten her. "I hated the idea of serving men in any way," she says. "I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. Besides, those little shorthand symbols in the book my mother showed me seemed just as bad as let *t* equal time and let *s* equal the total distance" (79). And later: "The only thing was, when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand my mind went blank . . . as I sat there and watched, the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness" (128).

Nor is the world of *Ladies' Day* the source of the language Esther craves. *Ladies' Day* teaches not self-expression but how to serve men—almost literally. Seated at a table emblematic of the cloying excess of female domesticity, Esther gorges herself in a stereotype of worshipful, repressive female hunger (27-28); the grotesqueness of overeating and its relation to female sexuality are picked up in the hospitalization scenes later on and in the consequences of Esther's insulin therapy. Esther's gluttony results not only in a deathlike physical ill-

ness anticipating her suicide attempt, but also the total silence in which suicide also culminates. Her lips produce only a parody of botanical richness and fulness—the "fuzzy pink-lip shape [that] bloomed right in the middle of [her] napkin like a tiny heart" (50), that represents the imprint, not of language, but of silence. When they open again, her lips only spew forth the consequences of the poison, contained appropriately enough in the "bland," "pink-mottled claw-meat" (50; Dr. Gordon's language also conceals a "claw" [137]).

Implicit in the confrontations with Jay Cee, her fellow young women, and physics and chemistry, is a struggle with a male domination expressed not only in social intercourse but in the potencies of language itself. The crisis, therefore, that precipitates Esther's suicide attempt is not surprisingly a literary crisis, a confrontation with the inadequacy of male writers to express a woman's inner self or to become instruments of that self-expression. Literature in and of itself is not a solution to the problem of women, for literature can also speak both male and female languages. The language of James Joyce partakes of precisely those qualities Esther associates with the masculine languages of Mr. Manzi, her father, and Jay Cee. It follows some physics of its own ("it was like a heavy wooden object falling downstairs" [131]). And it is written in barbed and horned letters reminiscent of the barbed-wire of German and the scorpions of science. Its grotesque shapes are "fantastic, untranslatable," and unsayable (131). They cannot reflect Esther's consciousness and are therefore repelled by it, "like faces in a funhouse mirror" (131). The letters force Esther into a mathematical relationship to them: she counts them. They are an "alphabet soup" that mocks nurture and denies fertility, making an "unpleasant dent" in her stomach (130). A string of one hundred letters without end, of words without pause, they provide no space for Esther "to crawl in between [the] black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence, and . . . go to sleep" (57). Esther will have to find her own literary language and form. This is precisely what Plath's novel does.

Esther's back-to-the-womb suicide attempt, characterized by her

desire to be blanketed by a darkness that is her "own sweet shadow," engulfed by a "sleep" toward which she crawls in a reversal of the birth process, represents the ultimately fatal female retreat. The place of retreat is an exclusively female enclosure of which her retreats from chemistry and physics, from Jay Cee, from *Ladies' Day*, and finally and most critically from male literature, are lesser imitations. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter describes a "female aesthetic" which bases itself upon "self-annihilation" rather than "self-realization": "retreat from the ego, retreat from the physical experience of women, retreat from the material world, retreat into separate rooms and separate cities. . . . The ultimate room of one's own is the grave" (297; cf. Spacks). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath explicitly rejects this aesthetic. She realizes that suicide cannot image or embody a female aesthetic, because it is, literally, a dead end. Therefore, though Esther's largely intuitive, spontaneous retreats lead to self-destruction, Plath's process of textual retreat, in the college/Jay Cee/*Ladies' Day* sequence and in the novel as a whole, represents a feminist discourse characterized not only by retreat but also by recovery. Also retreating, remembering, digressing, enveloping scene within scene, story within story, the text reopens discourse with the world from which it is at the same time in flight.

The first half of the novel records two separate narratives—the stories of Buddy Willard and of Esther's summer in New York City. These two stories do not mathematically equal one another. Rather they circle each other, each story expressed through imagistic mini-narratives embedded within the matrix created by the other similarly condensed story fragment. This relationship of stories, in which frame and focus, cause and effect—the elements of scientific formulation and equation—shift location and displace each other, inaugurates a dynamic antithesis to Esther's deathly inward spiraling. What begins as potentially deadly retreat, mirroring Esther's increasingly desperate and dangerous escapes, becomes, as it moves to the center of consciousness, a new, independent, and defiant context, no longer retreat but

controlled and purposeful narrative, a story in its own right, moving outward rather than inward. There are no simple formulae in Plath's novel, no symbolic abbreviations (symbolism itself being a male form). Rather there are shapes and diagrams and cycles that breathe life into one another in a process so complex it extends out of fictional text into authorial biography.

To define this process is Plath's literary objective. Plath realizes that just as men require a thrust outward to connect their vision to the world, so women must also possess an energy capable of leading them out of the room-womb into the world. In the second half of her book, Plath describes this feminist discourse. The book opens with a powerful image of the energy that female literature must avoid. Though electricity does not immediately suggest the masculine, nonetheless it represents the male sexuality and power the female artist must replace with a potency of her own. "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs," the narrative begins. "I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick. . . . It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. . . . I thought it must be the worst thing in the world" (1). Esther's later experience with shock therapy confirms her worst suspicions about electrocution and reveals what it has to do with her:

> Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. . . . An old metal lamp surfaced in my mind. One of the few relics of my father's study. . . . One day I decided to move this lamp. . . . I closed both hands around the lamp and the fuzzy cord and gripped them tight. . . . Then something leapt out of the lamp . . . and I tried to pull my hands off, but they were stuck, and I screamed. (151-52)

In the context of international relations, electricity preserves social order by painfully punishing dissent. In the world of sexual relations, it is the powerful male charge that obliterates female consciousness (Esther falls asleep after her treatment), shrinking and fragmenting her identity (the "ee ee ee" recalls the earlier "Ee Gee"). Like barbed-wire it rapes her or splits her open like a vulnerable plant. Earlier Esther had a similar encounter with this male energy. Skiing for the first time, she experiences an orgasmic thrill. But the experience breaks her, splits her apart like the electrical shock, and anticipates her back-to-the-womb attempt. Skiing has this effect on Esther because it is directed and controlled by a male presence, both literally in the shape of Buddy, and metaphorically in the rough, "bruising snake of a rope" binding Esther to its phallic pull. Esther cannot dissociate herself from this rope; it never occurs to her to say no. The moment Esther aims down the slope (102), she gives herself to maleness: "I wanted to hone myself on [the] sun till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife." It is no accident that Esther falls when a man steps into her path. When maleness asserts its control over her life, when it interferes with her own internal zig-zagging rhythms (she pleads with Buddy that she can't go straight down because she does not even know how to zig-zag yet), Esther is endangered. And that danger is as much a consequence of control over her imagination as over her actions. She craves the wounding knife, imagines herself in its decidedly masculine terms (98-102).

Her realization of this danger insinuates itself into her consciousness as a decided alternative to the snakish rope, a fragile, threatened thread: "The lilt and boom threaded by me like an invisible rivulet in a desert of snow" (99). This thread is not yet strong enough to save her from the phallic rope, but it is the key. To experience the orgasmic moment on her own terms, and to survive it, Esther must discover a source of energy within herself as powerful as the phallic cords and ropes of male energy, yet of a female nature, a rivulet that brings nurture along with direction.

It is not that women are incapable of containing and embodying male energy. That, indeed, is their traditional function. No sooner has the book begun than Esther associates the electrical metaphor with Doreen: "Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the colour of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity. She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them" (5-6). Insofar as Doreen is associated with a female principle—the scallopy leaves of sweet fern and a kind of intuitive quality that speaks straight from Esther's bones (7)—this electricity is all right; and Esther is attracted to Doreen "like a magnet" (5). But Doreen's kind of electricity is, ultimately, only an imitation of the male principle and a submission to it: her electricity leaves her painfully exposed, and it is, finally, a "marvelous, elaborate decadence" (5), giving off its scent only when the woman is crushed and broken. If nothing worse, it is static electricity and not power at all.

The female requires what Esther discovers by the end of the book: the "magical thread" that represents neither the phallus nor its erratic, spermatic electricity, but the umbilicus and the slow process of birth which it controls (cf. Coyle 173). "The deep drenched sleep," with "Doctor Nolan's face swimming" in front of her (227), quickly associates her second electric shock treatment with birth just as the earlier experience with the male chauvinist Dr. Gordon had represented a kind of death. Unlike Dr. Gordon, who confuses and mangles and veritably obliterates Esther's identity (her watch is replaced upside down, her hair pins are out of place, he greets her by repeating his earlier, sexist, identity-abbreviating comment about the WAC station, and he addresses his prognosis to Esther's mother), Dr. Nolan confirms Esther's identity and reestablishes her sense of self. She names Esther, repeating her name three times, and speaks directly to her (see Rigney's discussion of finding a name [121]). Even more important, she leads her out of the bell jar, out of the room, into the "fresh, blue-skied air"

(21)—after a "brief series of five" sessions, Esther is given "town privileges" (228). And once in the world, Esther can begin to function not only as a person but as a woman (Dr. Nolan also signs her prescription for a diaphragm). The male symbols around which she had constructed a self-destructive identity suddenly lose their importance and are replaced by female symbols of freedom and control:

> I took up the silver knife and cracked off the cap of my egg. Then I put down the knife and looked at it. I tried to think what I had loved knives for, but my mind slipped from the noose of the thought and swung, like a bird, in the centre of empty air. (228)

The knife had represented suicide in a double sense. Not only was it as effective a method of suicide as a noose (though both, significantly, cannot work for her), but it had represented the male image of orgasm in the skiing scene. Now it loses its importance and is replaced by the free-swinging and bird-like thread of thought.

This free-swinging image, hanging like a bird in mid-air by a filament too aetherial or ephemeral to see, has, in fact, been a major element of Plath's strategy throughout the book. The "cadaver's head . . . on a string . . . like a balloon" (2), the "successful evasion of chemistry" that "floated" into Esther's mind along with the image of Mr. Manzi "like something conjured up out of a hat" (39), the "faces" that "floated, flushed and flamelike" during her luncheon with Constantin (81), "Buddy's face . . . like a distracted planet" (102), "fashion blurbs" that send up "fishy bubbles" in her brain (104), "pristine, imaginary manuscript[s] floating in mid-air, with Esther Greenwood typed in the upper-right hand corner" (108), the lamp surfacing in her memory (152), "Doctor Nolan's face swimming in front of" her (227) or "swimming up from the bottom of a black sleep" (52), "Joan's face" (248) and her "mother's" "float[ing] to mind" (250)—these are not images that fix and stabilize meaning. Rather they name processes embodying not only the subjects of consciousness but also the manner of female

imagizing. They convey the embryonic fluidity of the female imagination as its images are borne to the surface of consciousness, tentatively, subtly, and yet insistently, irresistibly. These image formations correspond to the novel's larger structure of envelopment, containment, and encapsulation in which memories and digressions depart from the surface of the text and lodge themselves within the heart of the work. But these images also reveal explicitly what is only implicit in the relationship between narrative scene and digressive memory, the process whereby the image returns to consciousness and to the surface of the text. This is the birthing process that issues in a uniquely female life and art.

Earlier, to the imagination untutored in the language of female discourse, these floating, surfacing images might well have seemed evidences of a disjunctive consciousness going mad. By the end of the book, especially after we have experienced with Esther her psychological rebirth, these images come to express a specifically female species of image formation. The free-floating images and the procreative threads that simultaneously attach them to female procreativity and yet allow them to be born into the world are what distinguish female art from male art. The female artist not only must discover appropriate female images for her uniquely female experience, but she must also cultivate in her text, as in her life, a specifically female process, a procreative discourse that does not subordinate itself to or become infused with male sexuality and language. When maleness controls femaleness, when it anchors the fluid female image in itself and stiffens it into a male object, the female writer loses the reins of her creative authority and her images settle into poor imitations of a male psyche and art.

The figure of the fig tree, for example, which Esther accidently comes across while recovering from her (male-linked) poisoning, enters into her story, as into her consciousness, in the female process of apparent disrelation, in which psychological truth floats to the surface, undirected, unfixed. In this moment of unplanned revelation Esther immediately comprehends the relevance of the story to her own life, and she

so identifies with it that she wishes literally to merge with the text. "The beautiful big green fig-tree," "the fig-tree in winter under the snow and then the fig-tree in spring with all the green fruit" corresponds to the natural, biological rhythms of her own heart and mind (57).

But as her recollection of the fig tree is affected by her relationships to Constantin, the male translator of languages, and Buddy, the tree not only loses its seductive power (perhaps Esther's interpretation of the story has already impaired its attractiveness), but it comes to image Esther's paralyzed imagination. "Adding up all the things [she] couldn't do" and feeling "dreadfully inadequate," Esther sees her "life branching out . . . like the green fig-tree in the story":

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. . . . I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (79-80)

Forced to consciousness by the sterile, male-oriented act of adding up her assets and deficits (all according to sexist categories), the tree metamorphoses into a projection of female dependence on the male. The green, womb-like, even vaginal, figs of female procreativity hang helpless on the hard phallic branches, out of reach for Esther, who sits immobilized in the tree's crotch, her own sexuality, as it were, made inaccessible to her.

But the fig tree not only images the sterility of stereotypical sexual relationships. Its transformation from a vital image of Esther's psyche to a dead and deadening image of sexual sterility comes about as a consequence of the male domination over female imagination. In other words, the fig tree images sterility because Esther has allowed the image to be filtered through her consciousness of Constantin's and

Buddy's reductive expectations of her. The tree is a veritable image of the kind of androgyny that some female writers might see as a solution to the male-female problem of art, but which Plath sees as leading to artistic sterility (see Heilbrun 145ff). The crotch in which Esther sits is neither male nor female; the forking branches, which recall the male phallus, are in a birthing position; and the figs suggest the tip of the male penis as much as they do female organs. In such a hermaphroditic crotch, Esther is powerless either to bear or to be born; hence the fruit of this tree is black and wrinkled and dead. Like the "cat's cradle" of Hilda's unfeeling heart, the tree allows male energy to overwhelm its female properties, and therefore it loses its restorative, redemptive female power, both as a tree and as a symbol. Indeed, it may well be that the tree fails *because* it has stiffened into a symbol, because it is no longer processive and alive like the other images—the balloons, for example, and bubbles—that invigorate her text. By the end of the scene, Esther disputes not only what the tree symbolizes but its power to symbolize at all: "It occurred to me that my vision of the fig-tree and all the fat figs that withered and fell to earth might well have risen from the profound void of an empty stomach" (81).

In her final pages, Plath creates a last, quintessential female image that surfaces and quickens in the dynamic process which she believes distinguishes the female aesthetic from the male. Chapter twenty begins with a long, convoluted sentence, a non sequitur to the final words of the preceding chapter. This sentence introduces a chapter replete with non-sentences, broken paragraphs and thoughts, and textual spaces, a typographical manifestation of the principles of spacing and enveloping that have characterized the novel from the beginning, as if the text itself were coming out from under the bell jar. This circling and circulating sentence gives birth to the final image of the book, "the heart of winter":

> A fresh fall of snow blanketed the asylum—not a Christmas sprinkle, but a man-high January deluge, the sort that snuffs out schools and offices

and churches, and leaves, for a day or more, a pure, blank sheet in place of memo pads, date books and calendars. . . .

The heart of winter. (249)

The "heart of winter" image, with its "*man*-high deluge" of obliterating snow is potentially just as dangerous as the fig tree—both for what it symbolizes about the world and for its power to assert itself as a symbol. But the heart of winter, while capable of freezing, will not itself be frozen. Able to still the world, it will not be stilled. The snow is only the heart's agent. The important figure is the heart, which represents repetition, recirculation, and remembering:

I remembered everything.

I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig-tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull.

Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them.

But they were part of me. They were my landscape. (250)

The heart of winter does not obliterate the "topography" of the world that lies beneath it. Its snow blankets the pricks and stings and surfaces of this man's world, and enables them to be tolerated. But unlike the male medicine that deceives women into reproducing by annihilating their memory of pain, the heart of winter encourages birth by verifying and validating the pain, by making it an expression of meaningful consciousness. In this way it overrides the suicidal impulse, which, in its intensification of the wish to forget, becomes an acquiescence to male domination over female memory and consciousness. It replaces the desire for death, the desire to return to womb-like unconsciousness, with a desire for life, a desire to leave the womb and be born:

> There would be a black, six-foot gap hacked in the hard ground. That shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in the whiteness, and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave.
>
> I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
>
> I am, I am, I am. (256)

The repetitive beat of her heart asserts both identity (I) and existence (am). Its triple repetition recalls Dr. Nolan's naming of Esther three times. It signals not only the fact of Esther's rebirth but the rhythm that will define it and the power that will control it. The beat or brag is not, like an electrical, spermatic charge (or even like a literal birth), a one-time expulsion of self outward. It is a continuous, repeating, loving pulsation that heals and births in the same process. And the force that supervises it is the self. Esther causes her own deep breath and listens to her own heart.

Esther's rebirth, therefore, is a self-birth. But it is also a marriage of the heart. In leaving the security of the womb, she weds herself to the world, the same world that has caused her so much pain. Picking up the car imagery that a few pages earlier signified her liberation from Buddy, Esther acknowledges that all psychological or emotional birth is rebirth, all identity a wedding of old and new. She is now "patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (257). Esther realizes that she cannot be born anew. But she can be healed. She can be born "twice" (256). The male world and its language (the world and language of cars and automotive power, for example) cannot be discarded. Indeed, they are as indispensable to female art as is male sexuality to female procreation. Plath rejects the lesbian alternative, just as she rejects the possibility of androgyny, explicitly dissociating herself from Joan and then sealing off the lesbian option in Joan's death. The topography of sexual conflict cannot be made to disappear. The sexist language exists as a part of the woman's literary and cultural heritage as surely as it forms the physical, chemical, botanical basis of the universe.

But a woman can, and must, even as she weds herself to a male world, also marry herself to her own female self. This is what Plath calls being ret(h)readed. As Dr. Nolan's touch, thread-like, draws Esther into the room, she discovers the magical thread that is both the source of her inner creativity and her link with the world. The thread moves in two directions. On the one hand, it emanates from the doctors (including the male doctors) who guide her into health and whose knowledge, experience, and language she must absorb. But it is also a thread spun out of self; it is she herself who fixes their gaze upon her and enables the thread to materialize.[4]

This thread leads out of the bell jar, out of the room of one's own, into a room that is, and perhaps will remain, largely a male space. It is a powerful thread, an umbilicus able to assimilate the male energy, to convert it within the interior space of the female into a thriving, pulsating, vibrating life, and then to bear that issue outward into the world as a unique expression of self. This is the thread of feminist discourse, which, necessarily rooting itself in the male language that has preceded it, transforms it into a feminist language and art.

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Notes

1. Eileen Aird specifically discounts the importance of feminism in Plath's work (91), while in a chapter entitled "The Self-Created Other: Integration and Survival," Barbara Hill Rigney finds a feminist basis for the Laingian conflict (119-24). See also Judith Kroll on the issue of a true and false self (13). Suzanne Juhasz calls Plath's work "feminine" as opposed to feminist (58).

2. According to Plath's letters, the botany teacher was also a man. Mr. Manzi was the art teacher. Plath deliberately alters biographical facts, I think, to emphasize the maleness of science. For the same reason, she also does not acknowledge in the book that "words like erg, joules, valences, watts, coulombs, and amperes" are also "beautiful" and "euphonic" (Aurelia Plath 68-69 and 97-98).

3. This echo of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* in both Plath's novel and Jong's essay is

also picked up in Reardon's quotation from Jong that she is "Exhibit A" in a man's world (143).

4. David Holbrook cites as a "central theme" of the book "impingement . . . 'being done to'" (65-66). Here, finally, Plath is not done to, but does.

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Sylvia Plath's Anti-Psychiatry

Maria Farland

1955 marked the all-time peak of inmates in American mental institutions; by 1980 this figure had shrunk to less than one-fourth of the original total. In 1950, the average stay in a mental hospital was twenty years; by 1975, it was seven months (Gillon 97). In a brief twenty-year period, institutional psychiatry had been massively and irrevocably transformed. What were the social and intellectual origins of these transformations? What were their political and economic consequences? How did contemporary critiques of psychiatry—broadly grouped under the heading "anti-psychiatry"—contribute to these changes?

This article investigates the social consequences of the anti-psychiatry movement through an examination of one of the postwar period's most well-known representations of psychiatric institutions, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. I argue that Plath's 1963 novel echoes the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of the anti-psychiatry movement, while simultaneously mobilizing that rhetoric on behalf of a class-inscribed reapportioning of mental health resources. Against this backdrop, Plath's novel functions not only as an autobiographical account of a highly personal experience of psychiatric illness, but also as a trenchant social critique of psychiatric institutions. Paradoxically, by locating the novel in the context of *public* debates surrounding psychiatry, we can begin to see its ideological commitment to the *private* sphere, and, more importantly, to the privatization of these institutions.

Though the anti-psychiatry movement had already begun to take shape at the time of Plath's own hospitalization in the 1950s, the movement is frequently associated with the film version of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which brought the critique of psychiatry to popular audiences in the 1970s. One of anti-psychiatry's practicing clinicians, Stanford psychologist D. L. Rosenhan, attracted the media's attention with the publication of a scholarly paper in *Science* called "On Being Sane in Insane Places." Rosenhan's article reported

on a study in which psychologically normal investigators presented themselves at a mental hospital's admissions desk and were immediately committed to inpatient care. Though their symptoms were entirely fabricated, and they never showed any subsequent signs of illness, the hospital retained the bogus patients under observation for periods ranging from seven to fifty-two days (Isaac and Armat 53-54). With the enormous publicity garnered by tactics such as Rosenhan's and the mass popularity of films like *Cuckoo's Nest*, the anti-psychiatry movement gained adherents on both sides of the Atlantic. The movement's nonconformist, anti-establishment message struck a chord with North American audiences, bringing unexpected celebrity to figures like clinical psychiatrist R. D. Laing. In his first visit to the U.S. in 1972, a surprised Laing was greeted by bumper stickers proclaiming "I'm mad about R. D. Laing," and by invitations for interviews with *Reader's Digest*, *Playboy*, and the *Today* show (Isaac and Armat 29).

For a 70s media already entranced with counter-cultural icons like Timothy Leary and figures like Laing, flamboyant stunts like Rosenhan's were irresistible. But the irony was that by the time of Rosenhan's experiment in 1973, the "sane people in insane places" to which his article referred had virtually disappeared. Between 1955 and 1975, unprecedented numbers of insane people had been released. By 1975, the average patient stay in an asylum was a mere 2.8% of what it had been only two decades before—a mind-boggling reduction of the kind of "involuntary incarceration" at which films like *Cuckoo's Nest* aimed their social critique. This almost complete abdication of long-term care for the chronically mentally ill marked a dramatic transformation in the treatment of mental illness in postwar America—a transformation that was marked by fiscal and market imperatives as well as by class divisions. Yet paradoxically, even though this widespread expulsion of the mentally ill had already become a *fait accompli*, the public outcry against involuntary incarceration began to gain momentum. This striking temporal gap between the dismantling of institutions in the 1950s and the indignant calls for the dismantling of those same in-

stitutions in the 1970s suggests that we must look to the 1950s and early 1960s to assess the ideological leanings of anti-psychiatry.

While many of the artistic and literary endeavors that we associate with anti-psychiatry are located squarely in the 1970s, the intellectual currents that shaped the movement originated in the 1950s. Erving Goffman did his fieldwork for the monumental study *Asylums* at the federal psychiatric institution St. Elizabeth's Hospital in the years 1955-1956; and psychiatrist Thomas Szasz and experimental clinical practitioners like Laing conducted preliminary research in the mid-50s. 1961 was a watershed year in the mainstreaming of these anti-psychiatric intellectual currents, marked by the publication of Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients*, Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness*, and Laing's best-selling *The Divided Self* in 1960. A series of creative endeavors followed almost immediately: Ken Kesey's 1962 *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Sam Fuller's innovative 1963 film *Shock Corridor*, and Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963, although it was not published in a U.S. edition until 1971). These intellectual trends were quickly enshrined in public policy. The Kennedy Community Mental Health Act of 1963 sought to replace state mental hospitals with community mental health centers, resulting in an immediate expulsion of former mental health patients into shelters, hotels, and prisons. Cultural and legislative authority thus converged with almost uncanny precision, gradually funneling money away from the lower socio-economic demographic towards middle- and upper-class persons who could afford mental health therapies, which were increasingly financed on a fee-for-service basis.

We conventionally associate the campaign against the incarceration of mental patients with the social protest writings of figures such as Laing, Goffman, and Michel Foucault (whose *Madness and Civilization*, influenced by the work of Goffman, appeared in 1965). These writers objected to what they saw as psychiatry's oppressive treatment of patients, a view epitomized in Szasz's widely-repeated slogan, "involuntary mental hospitalization is like slavery." But it is important to

recall that the first steps away from existing conventions of psychiatric confinement stemmed as much from economic necessity as from idealism. The emptying of America's psychiatric institutions, as shown in debates surrounding the 1963 Mental Health Act, was the outcome of a growing sense that postwar prosperity was coming to an end. Indeed, between 1939 and 1949, per patient costs for mental health treatment had accelerated a staggering 150%, continuing their upward climb through the 1950s (Gillon 91). By 1955, when Michael Gorman's *Every Other Bed* announced that one-half of all hospital beds were occupied by the mentally ill, the federally-mandated Mental Health Study Act of 1955 had already started to issue recommendations urging a shift away from expensive custodial care towards a new emphasis on prevention, education, and community-based treatment. In the face of shrinking U.S. economic prospects, legislators argued, the elaborate social protections that were the legacy of the 1930s were no longer feasible. Kennedy, signing the bill into law on 31 October 1963, called for a "strengthening of non-institutional services" and a downsizing of the "massive subsidizing of existing, anachronistic state public health institutions" (Gillon 93). The goal of such measures was to reduce the "number of patients in mental institutions by fifty percent" (qtd. in Gillon 96). But more importantly, the goal was to reduce costs, as Kennedy stressed: "here more than in any other area, an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. For prevention is . . . *far more economical* and far more likely to be successful" (qtd. in Isaac and Armat 77). The dismantling of existing psychiatric institutions thus took place in the context of a gradual dismantling of the welfare state that made state-funded treatments and institutions seem less attractive in the postwar era than they had in the previous three decades. Ironically, then, the kind of contractual psychotherapy endorsed by anti-psychiatry polemicists like Szasz and Laing was ideally suited to the redistribution of mental health resources that was already underway in the legislative and public spheres.

These dramatic realignments of health and welfare policy are indis-

pensable background for understanding the critique of psychiatry put forth in *The Bell Jar*. It tells the story of a young woman who circulates in and out of mental hospitals, chronicling her mental illness and eventual hospitalization and shock treatment with almost clinical precision. Living in London, Plath set out to write the novel she referred to as a "pot-boiler" in the spring of 1962—a period that coincided precisely with the months in which attacks on psychiatry by Goffman, Szasz, and Laing took center stage in the British press. Looking to the popular mental illness novels of the 1950s for her model, Plath sought to represent, in her words, "how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown." "[I] must get out 'Snake Pit,'" Plath wrote in her journal in March of 1959, referring to the best-selling 1946 novel by Mary Jane Ward: "There is an increasing market for mental hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it" (Stevenson 154, 45). The mass-market appeal of mental breakdown novels and memoirs was evident both in the widespread circulation of Ward's novel and in the popularity of Shirley Jackson's 1951 novel *Hangsaman*. In this instance, Plath demonstrated a canny nose for trends. With the subsequent vogue for mental illness memoirs such as Joanne Greenberg's 1964 *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, these books assumed the status of a subgenre for educated, middle-class women—a genre whose enduring popularity can be seen in the recent success of memoirs and films like *Girl, Interrupted*.

Plath's novel is unmistakably indebted both to the popular 1950s mental health narratives and memoirs she called "potboilers," and to the more highbrow anti-psychiatry protest literature that had begun to be disseminated widely by the time Plath began to draft the novel in 1962. Plath, like other critics of psychiatry, finds coercive clinical practices such as Esther Greenwood's shock treatments disturbing in their brutality and violence. Mental health memoirs sensationalize this violence, whereas anti-psychiatry protest literature deplores it. Plath's novel straddles these two rhetorical modes. Even as she seeks to capitalize on the most lurid aspects of the genre by providing readers with a

blow-by-blow account of her protagonist's mental breakdown, Plath seeks to interrogate the normative dimension of mental health institutions, and the normative dynamics of more mundane institutions, such as family and marriage. While she echoes anti-psychiatry's contempt for the coercive treatment of patients, Plath is less sanguine about the consensual doctor-patient relations that were the utopian ideal of clinical anti-psychiatry. In this respect, Plath's novel simultaneously endorses, and challenges, anti-psychiatry's reformist agenda.

"Some private, totalitarian state"

If *The Bell Jar* is in many respects characteristic of the mental breakdown fictions that gained popularity in the immediate postwar period, it is equally characteristic of postwar fiction's fascination with the dynamics of conformity and rebellion. While the novel's social critique is often linked to 1970s feminism, it also has powerful affinities with the critiques of the 1950s "consensus" culture seen in the writings of the decade's sociologists and beat poets. In Plath's novel, established institutions and the conformity they enforce are embodied in the psychiatric institution and the boundaries it inscribes between normal and pathological individuals. For Plath, madness emerges as a kind of liberation from social imperatives, particularly the restrictions that society imposes on middle-class women. Yet paradoxically, while psychiatric illness is imagined as a kind of antidote to middle-class conformity, it also emerges as the marker of middle-class privilege—privilege afforded in the newfound exclusivity of selective mental hospitals such as McLean. In their newly-privatized incarnations, the novel suggests, mental hospitals served less as an indicator of an individual's sanity than of her liquidity; for patients like Esther Greenwood, wealth is a prerequisite for admission. In this context, the novel's critique of institutions aims itself against middle-class conformity, while simultaneously promoting a redistribution of wealth and resources whose direct beneficiaries were affluent, middle-class citizens of the United States.

The novel's critique of the medical establishment begins with its scathing treatment of Esther's boyfriend Buddy, the aspiring doctor who wins a prize in medical school for persuading the most "relatives of dead people to have their loved ones cut up whether they needed it or not" (77). For Esther, such persuasiveness represents a form of coercive medical practice, in which doctors seek to protect the public good rather than the best interests of the individual patient. Marriage to Buddy emerges as a similar loss of agency and is viewed by Esther as a kind of involuntary mental hospitalization:

> I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think that maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about as numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (69)

The terms "slave" and "totalitarian" resonate with Szaszian anti-psychiatry, which argued that "totalitarian," or institutional, medicine, was "involuntary incarceration." Szasz was not the first to compare psychiatric institutions with other forms of involuntary confinement. In his highly publicized 1946 *Life* article, "Bedlam 1946," A. Q. Maisel observed that American psychiatric institutions "degenerate into little more than concentration camps on the Belsen Pattern" (102); two years later, reporting on America's mental hospitals, Albert Deutsch wrote of "scenes that rivaled the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps" (Isaac and Armat 67-68). Szasz, too, deplored mental health treatments as "totalitarian," proposing what he called "contractual psychiatry," in which a freely-entered contract between the patient and the therapist would form the basis for an improved therapeutic relationship. Plath's use of the terms "slave" and "totalitarian" recalls Szasz's invocation of "totalitarian" psychiatry, just as *The Bell Jar*'s emphasis on contractual therapeutic relations recalls Szasz's support for therapeutic approaches grounded in consent rather than in coercion. Her

emphasis on contractual therapies, too, reflects anti-psychiatry's characteristic attention to the patient's agency and freedom.

If psychiatric institutions divide persons into normal and pathological, the middle-class institutions of *The Bell Jar* designate as "insane" those women who do not fit the conventional images of womanhood—Esther, who rejects marriage and motherhood, or Joan, the lesbian physicist. Esther is torn between conventional and unconventional choices, and it is her indecision, according to the novel, that constitutes her "neurosis." "I'm never going to get married," she tells her boyfriend Buddy Willard, who responds, predictably, "You're crazy" (62). Esther tells him she is unable to decide between the city and the country, between marriage and career, between chastity and promiscuity. The novel figures this indecision in the image of a fig tree; Esther imagines her "life branching out" before her "like the green fig tree" whose branches designate mutually exclusive options: "a husband and a happy home and children"; "a famous poet"; "a brilliant professor"; and "an amazing editor" (62). "I'm neurotic," she explains to Buddy, invoking the diagnosis often counterpoised to the more intractable mental illness of the psychotic. Esther's unwillingness to marry is thus figured as a kind of mild mental illness, neurosis, and her prospective husband is deemed unsuitable insofar as he embodies the coercive practices of medical and mental health institutions. In this way, many of the novel's most emphatically feminist moments find vivid expression in its attacks on psychiatry and on medicine. Buddy's patriarchal tendencies are visible in the "totalitarian" practices of the medical profession itself, so that oppressive medical and psychiatric institutions function as a figure for sexist institutions more broadly.

In *The Bell Jar*, as in the anti-psychiatric treatises of clinicians like Laing, madness represents one possible release from the deformations of social convention, emerging as Esther's best prospect for liberation from conformist ideals of marriage and family. The dangers of such conformity are epitomized by the figure of Buddy's mother, who advises Esther to adhere closely to middle-class norms of womanhood

which decree that "a man wants a mate" and "a woman wants infinite security" (58). A man "is an arrow into the future," Mrs. Willard counsels, just as a woman should be content to occupy "the place the arrow shoots off from" (58). In her subsequent skiing trip with Buddy, Esther inverts this notion of woman as a static springing-off point, becoming a vector-like force in her own right as she plunges headlong down the slope. Impelled by a "small, answering point in [her] own body," Esther locates herself firmly along the trajectory of male-coded prerogative, "hurtl[ing] on to the still bright point at the end" of the slope (79). At the end point of her suicidal descent, Esther achieves an idyllic calm, a sense of boundless possibility predicated upon her suicidal impulse: "I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife" (79). In her appropriation of the male-gendered vector, and the transmutation of that vector into a powerful weapon, Esther reverses the socially-coded hierarchies of male/female and active/passive, acceding to a position of masculine-coded dominance. At such moments, madness is aligned with a prospective escape from socially-prescribed norms of gender, and the novel valorizes insanity as a liberating antidote to normative middle-class institutions of marriage and family. The novel's anti-psychiatry provides a mode of resistance for its feminist protagonist, the descent into madness serving as the vehicle for women's prospective ascent out of patriarchal culture.

Yet while madness serves as the engine for women's liberation, and for escape from middle-class norms of gender, it simultaneously emerges as the site upon which new middle-class privileges take shape. In its painstaking taxonomy of mental health treatments and facilities, *The Bell Jar* draws careful distinctions between the public city hospital and the state-of-the-art private facility where Esther begins her return to normalcy, inscribing superior value to private, over public, care. The novel's detailed attention to the class-inscribed hierarchies of mental health treatments reflects Plath's own experience. Plath herself was initially placed in Newton-Wellesley Hospital, from which she was transferred to the psychiatry wing of the (then-public)

Mass General Hospital, and finally to the exclusive, private McLean Hospital. These shifts inscribed Plath within an ascending progression of class-marked institutions, as biographical accounts have made clear. McLean brought "a private room and every advantage one of the best mental hospitals in the country could confer," biographer Anne Stevenson notes (46). Plath's benefactor, the millionaire Olive Higgins Prouty, made a lavish and well-publicized contribution to Plath's McLean hospitalization, rescuing her from the horrors of the public hospital in a chauffeured car: "[Prouty's] uniformed chauffeur drove Sylvia (accompanied by her mother and brother) from Boston to McLean Hospital in Belmont—a prestigious, beautifully rural sanatorium with one of the finest psychiatric staffs in the state" (Butscher 122). *The Bell Jar* fictionally recapitulates this class-marked geography of mental health care, creating a detailed sociology of psychiatric treatments that reflects anti-psychiatry's bias towards privileged Americans, depicting and at times even celebrating the asymmetrical redistribution of mental health care resources that would constitute the major legacy of the anti-psychiatric movement.

Such class-inscribed distinctions are most strikingly visible in the novel's representations of the dehumanizing treatment of psychiatric patients in the public, city hospital where Esther is moved after behaving badly in the first hospital (a private facility where she is given painful shock treatments by an incompetent, as well as sexist, doctor). Esther's "bad behavior" brings her to the public, city hospital, where she encounters rowdy inmates—the novel specifically mentions Italian American immigrants—and a staff of doctors who treat patients uncaringly and indiscriminately, without regard for individual identity. Esther displays visible contempt for the city hospital and its standard of treatment, addressing her undistinguished and anonymous doctors with appellations such as "Doctor So-and-So" and "Doctor Pancreas" and "Doctor Syphilis." She finds the food inedible and kicks the "Negro" who serves the patients two kinds of beans (and no meat). The inadequacy of the public hospital's cuisine is also reflected in its inade-

quate standard of medical care—most notably, the repetitive treatment plan, which consists of recurrent and redundant measurement of each patient's temperature. In response to the mediocrity of the treatment she receives, Esther smashes the nurse's thermometer. From this bad behavior, excruciating shock treatments and expulsion follow—the inept recourse of an impersonal institution that attends to its own bureaucratic convenience over the needs of its patients. In the logic of the novel, Esther's contempt for the city hospital is rooted in the genuine inadequacies of the treatment she finds there, and she is subsequently removed from the "cramped city hospital ward" to a "private hospital" with extensive grounds and a golf course.

The novel continues to stress the superior quality of privatized psychotherapeutic care during Esther's stay at the elegant private hospital, where her patron pays for her as if she is "on scholarship." The doctors who care for Esther are like professors, offering lessons in colonial history and local-color tales of "Pilgrims and Indians" (154). Esther compares the festive atmosphere to that of a "Girl Scout Camp," marveling at the patients "playing badminton and golf," and insisting that they "mustn't be really sick, at all" (154). Esther makes friends at the Belsize house, where social life and treatment are structured around a hierarchy of freedoms and privileges, moving quickly to an enjoyment of posh amenities such as "white linen tablecloths," bone china, and fine cutlery. A uniformed wait-staff and landscaped grounds give Belsize the air of an elite country club or college, as one nurse who works at both private and public hospitals observes: "Oh, it's not a nice place, like this. This is a regular country club. Over there they've got nothing" (170). Unlike the state hospital, which as the same nurse points out is drastically understaffed—"not enough employ-ees"—the private hospital allows for intimacy and individual attention between doctor and patient (171). Doctor Nolan, the glamorous Myrna Loyish physician who oversees Esther's treatment and recovery, embodies the kind of private, contractual, and consensual therapy between equals endorsed by Szasz and other critics of psychiatry. Dr. Nolan smokes

during her consultation and leaves Esther matches. She screens Esther's visitors and even shows sympathy for Esther's dislike of her mother. Dr. Nolan subsequently facilitates Esther's sexual freedom and independence, procuring a diaphragm for her and instructing her in its use. Most importantly, Esther's second electroshock therapy is "soothing," just as Dr. Nolan promises (175). By the end, Esther is on probation and even has sex, with Dr. Nolan's consent and assistance. Echoing anti-psychiatry's emphasis on the importance of individual liberty in the process of psychiatric treatment, *The Bell Jar* celebrates the person-to-person private psychotherapy that was becoming the new standard of mental health care. The novel affirms the value of this redistribution of mental health resources away from the impoverished and chronically ill, and towards those middle and upper-middle-class persons who could afford private medical care.

It is entirely logical, then, that Esther's recovery from psychiatric illness functions to shore up her privileged but fragile class position. In the highly differentiated universe of the cutting-edge psychiatric hospital, patients move up or down a graduated hierarchy of residential facilities ranked according to the individual patient's mental fitness. Esther contemplates her own uncertain status within that system: "Either I got better, or I fell down, down, like a burning, burnt out star, from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark, and finally, after Doctor Nolan and Mrs. Guinea had given me up, to the state place next door" (170). This fear of falling propels Esther forward along a narrative trajectory of escalating achievements and activities which mark her return to mental health. The novel charts her progress alongside that of her competitor, Joan, as Esther ascends an elaborate hierarchy of healthy behaviors, beginning with no longer wearing her pajamas during the day, ascending to normal social interactions, and culminating in her attainment of the quasi-freedom afforded by day-time privileges. Each step forward in the progression of improved mental health is rewarded with commensurate (and class-coded) privileges: "walk privileges," "shopping privileges," "town privileges." The novel carefully distinguishes be-

tween patients like Miss Norris who fail to get these privileges and those like Esther who achieve them (167). Patients' social interactions are extensively recorded, reflecting the notion that such sociality is crucial to their successful recovery. As part of his effort to substantiate the claim that social interactions and privileges would work to cure patients, Laing had drawn up elaborate charts of patient interactions he termed "sociograms." Charting Esther's social progress and interactions with meticulous detail, *The Bell Jar*'s narration assumes a sociogrammic form, recording the salutary effects of social interactions on individual patients. In their careful recounting of the upward mobility of individual patients, these representations also adumbrate the larger dynamic of social mobility that was the less obvious outcome of such clinical techniques: the favoring of middle-class over underclass needs in the ongoing privatization of health care and other entitlements.

"Voluntary Incarceration"

In *The Bell Jar*, the critique of visible, centralized institutions such as the asylum is simultaneously bound up in the prospective dismantling of that largest of twentieth-century institutions, the welfare state. Against the impersonality and anonymity of the psychiatric institution and its coercive exercise of power, anti-psychiatry proposed contractual relations between equals, embodied in the consensual relationship between doctor and patient. In celebrating the benefits of private fee-for-service psychotherapy, Plath's novel echoes these prescriptions, and yet Plath also goes beyond anti-psychiatry's utopian belief in voluntary, contractual psychotherapy. In *The Bell Jar*, even the putatively "consensual" relations between mutually-respectful doctor and patient are fraught with insidious forms of normative and authoritarian power. Plath thus cautions readers against the belief—common among anti-psychiatry's proponents—that voluntary patient compliance with psychotherapeutic techniques would ensure against the repressive treatments of the past.

If madness is the inevitable outcome of Esther's resistance to socially-prescribed norms, recovered sanity is an uneventful return to her former, socially-acceptable self, in the absence of any meaningful alternative. At the novel's end, Esther's cure consists in resigning herself to social prescriptions and norms rather than escaping from them. Hospital psychiatrists pronounce her "whole and well," "patched, retreaded, and approved for the road back to college" (199), assigning her to probation with full privileges. Rather than concluding her hospital stay, however, Esther elects to live in the hospital in the time remaining before the resumption of a new semester. Joan, her friend, is also allowed to leave the asylum, but elects to remain in nearby Cambridge, sharing an apartment with one of the hospital's nurses. In both instances, the psychiatric institution seems to have migrated outward into the very fabric of society, taking up residence within, rather than outside, the individual psyche. For Esther and Joan, conformity has been internalized as a self-inscribed behavioral imperative. Individuals, rather than institutions, emerge as the enforcers of conformity par excellence, and patients such as Esther and Joan continue to embrace the dictates of the institution even after they are freed from it.

The most vivid instance of this disciplinary society is Esther's friend Valerie, the inmate who has been lobotomized, but loves the asylum and chooses to stay there. Showing Esther the white scars that protrude like "horns" from her forehead, Valerie brags:

> "I've had a lobotomy."
>
> I looked at Valerie in awe, appreciating for the first time her perpetual marble calm. "How do you feel?"
>
> "Fine. I'm not angry any more. Before, I was always angry. I was in Wymark before, and now I'm in Caplan. I can go to town, now, or shopping or to a movie, along with a nurse."
>
> "What will you do when you get out?"
>
> "Oh, I'm not leaving," Valerie laughed. "I like it here." (157-58)

Valerie's story anticipates the most tragic moment in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when McMurphy learns that he is the only non-voluntary patient. McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched and is then lobotomized against his will; at the same time, many of *Cuckoo*'s voluntary patients recover their sanity and leave the institution. The horror dramatized in *Cuckoo's Nest* is the horror of involuntary hospitalization—the Szaszian nightmare of being committed against your will. But what is even more disturbing, in Plath's view, is the image of those who voluntarily submit themselves to hospitalization and normalization—a form of self-regulation even more insidious and invisible than the cruder exercise of authority experienced by McMurphy. By the end of Plath's novel, mental health treatment assumes a similar cast, functioning not through repression or involuntary incarceration, but through the production of self-regulating individuals.

Such invisible forms of normalization are most disturbingly in evidence in the doctor-patient relationship and are at work even in the ostensibly "consensual" therapeutic relation that was endorsed by anti-psychiatry. Esther's own doctor, the stylish Dr. Nolan, is a striking reminder of the coercion that persists in the most enlightened doctor-patient relation. In response to Esther's account of the gruesome shock treatments she has received at the previous hospital, Dr. Nolan assures her that she "won't have any shock treatments" while under her care. Yet even this basic assurance of respectful treatment is eroded in Nolan's subsequent, off-hand remark: "Or if you do, I'll tell you about it beforehand" (155). Only moments later, Doctor Nolan cheerfully informs Esther that "some people even like" shock treatments. And sure enough, by the end of Esther's hospitalization, shock treatments take their place alongside other techniques, such as insulin treatment and occupational therapy, that contribute to her eventual recovery. By imagining that the asylum's modes of incarceration and imprisonment have migrated outwards into society itself, and by conceiving of its patients as gradually adapting themselves to its disciplinary practices, Plath's novel levels its most devastating critique of psychiatry's authoritarian regimes—regimes

that extend beyond coercive institutionalization and into the contractual therapeutic model promoted by proponents of anti-psychiatry.

* * *

In writing the novel she called a "potboiler," Plath made deliberate use of the stylistic and generic conventions of the "mental hospital stuff" of her popular 1950s predecessors, impugning the dangerous, centralized authority of institutions such as psychiatry. Echoing the attacks on psychiatry led by contemporaries such as Szasz, Goffman, and Laing, Plath sought to evoke the repressive tendencies of large centralized institutions, typified by the asylum. Plath's critique of psychiatry, like those of her counterparts, entwines a scathing indictment of psychiatry's coercive practices—such as electroshock and lobotomy—with a sophisticated sense of the normalizing tendencies that characterize even the most consensual modes of psychiatric treatment. Plath's novel, and the enormously varied artistic endeavors inspired by anti-psychiatry, would pave the way for institutional reforms—contractual therapies, outpatient care, and privatized psychotherapy—that functioned to reallocate health care resources away from the permanent underclass of chronic psychiatric cases, into the hands of curable "neurotics" such as Esther Greenwood.

Yet even as it celebrates the benefits of private, contractual mental health treatment, Plath's novel remains alert to the potential dangers of such realignments. Even in a relation of supposed freedom and mutuality such as that of Esther and Dr. Nolan, Plath's novel suggests that the dynamics of coercion abide. Freed from the top-down restrictions of the asylum's authoritarian power, the individual remains subject to that authority in the form of internalized imperatives. In its attention to the complex dynamics of power and normalization that define the nexus of mental health institutions, practices, and patients, Plath's novel reaches beyond many of its counterparts in anti-psychiatric protest literature and scholarship.

The Bell Jar is instructive, however, not only for what it can teach us about what Plath and her contemporaries saw as the evils of psychiatry, but also for what it reveals about the class-based assumptions of the anti-psychiatry movement itself. Plath's novel demonstrates how the disenchantment with institutions seen in the cultural and legislative trends of the 1950s and early 60s would give impetus to the dissolution of health and welfare institutions in the subsequent two decades. Ironically, many of the first steps towards the shrinking of the welfare state stemmed not from the politics of Reagan and Thatcher, but from the anti-authoritarian polemics of figures like Kesey, Kerouac, and their contemporaries.

Perhaps most revealing of the ideological ramifications of anti-psychiatry is the bipartisan support for the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act of 1967. The bill, which placed strict legal limits on involuntary mental hospitalization, passed both the House and the Senate without a single dissenting vote, finding unanimous support from both civil liberties-oriented Democrats and fiscally-conservative Republicans. When Nixon took office in 1969, he too embraced the critique of psychiatry; though Congress continued to allocate funding to the community mental health centers, Nixon impounded it. Little more than ten years later, Ronald Reagan killed off what remained of the Mental Health Act, reallocating mental health funds in block grants to states. Though progressives blamed Reagan for the exodus of patients into America's streets, Reagan had merely finished off what Kennedy and Johnson had begun. "The snake pits have been moved to the communities," wrote one critic of the dumping of mental health patients onto America's streets and cities (qtd. in Isaac and Armat 45). Strangely enough, this wholesale release of mental patients into the community (a problem that would be re-described in the 1980s as the problem of the "homeless") was the unwitting legacy of an odd convergence of legislative, political, and cultural forces. From Ken Kesey to Ronald Reagan, from Thomas Szasz to Richard Nixon, from John Kennedy to Sylvia Plath—all agreed that mental health care was a matter not for the

state but for the individual family or individual patient. Kennedy's hope that "reliance on the cold mercy of custodian isolation" would be "supplanted by the open warmth of community concern and capability" was never realized (qtd. in Isaac and Armat 102). Rather, the critique of custodial confinement that began to take shape in the 1950s, and that had taken permanent hold by the 1980s, produced not the renewed public "concern and capability" that Kennedy envisioned, but a massive and irreversible trend towards privatization. Plath's *The Bell Jar* is just one of the numerous literary and cultural endeavors that gave impetus to this gradual ascendancy of private solutions over state-based services. Though we inevitably look to Plath's highly private act of suicide to assess the consequences of the novel's account of mental illness, we must not neglect the dramatic and far-reaching public consequences of the mental breakdown genre in American postwar culture and society.

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Mad Girls' Love Songs:
Two Women Poets—a Professor and Graduate Student—Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and the Poetics of Female Adolescence

Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver

Coming from a place of mutual interest in what it means to be a teenage girl, what it means to write about (and avoid writing about) that experience, and what Sylvia Plath has to do with this, we—poets Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver, at the time a professor and graduate student respectively—wrote an essay. We chose collaborative correspondence to promote a cooperative, freewheeling, and inclusive (read: feminist) approach, one that revises more traditional academic modes. Our interests were manifold: the myth of Plath and the legacy of the "suicide girl poet"; our own girlhoods and the poetry that was important to us then; what we *think* we know about Plath's poems versus what we see when we read them; what makes a poem attractive to a teenage girl reader; the poems teenage girls might want to read now; and what, if anything, these poets have to do with Plath.

Our discussion of girlhood centers on a subject who is white and middle-class, like Plath and like us. We acknowledge the limitations of and problems with this. Also, we are not hoping to offer any solutions to the many difficulties of girlhood described in this essay. Above all, we hope that this conversation might be a jumping-off point for others to think about the ways in which poetry is important in the formation of identity for young women.

The Enduring Legacy of Sylvia Plath for Female Readers

AG: The reason I wanted us to have this conversation about Plath is because of something you wrote in a class paper to me, responding to a prompt to think about your ideal audience. You wanted your po-

ems to reach teenage girl readers, even though the very idea of this seemed kind of suspect to you. Despite the fact that we both admire and value Plath's work, we see her as an icon of this kind of writing. But as feminists we are devoted to—and formed out of the reality of—the idea of the intelligent teenage girl poet-reader, a girl with agency and (burgeoning) tastes. How alarming, then, that even *we* might find the idea of writing a poem for a teenage girl reader, of being read by a teenage girl, distasteful. Sylvia Plath has a lot to do with this received notion of the teenage girl reader/writer as wallowing in self-pity.

You once told me about how surprised you were to hear me and other faculty members *admit* to liking Plath during our graduate school orientation.

BK: I remember that you and David Trinidad both claimed Plath as an influence during your self-introductions at MFA orientation, and I remember feeling a bit shocked by this. There's always anxiety in that scenario: *Are my tastes okay? Should I mention my guilty pleasures? God, I should have read more*. Hearing my new professors say "Plath" (not even "*Sylvia* Plath," the woman, the myth, but "Plath," the poet) instantly realigned my thinking—about Plath, about grad school itself. In the unwritten handbook for aspiring female writers, it's understood that the chapter on Plath ends with adolescence. Much of my own knowledge of Plath existed on the level of cultural mythology—I had the idea that she wasn't studied, she was talked about. Or she was simply alluded to, a metonym for "crazy girl." (As if to prove it, they decided to reprint Plath's catchy villanelle, "Mad Girl's Love Song," in the afterword of the copy of *The Bell Jar* (1981) I read in high school.) After we teenage girls had "gotten over" writers like Plath and Sexton, we were supposed to move on to Sharon Olds and Louise Glück and Jorie Graham.

How can Plath be both one of the most popular poets in the United States and a constant subject for academic criticism, while at the same time be a figure "serious" poets have been taught to look down upon?

AG: Strange indeed. I can't think of any other poets in this particular position, can you? It's been over forty years now since Plath died. Do you think that dichotomy has changed in recent years?

BK: In her article in *Poetry*, "Subject Sylvia," Meghan O'Rourke calls our moment a "second age of Plath criticism" (2004). She goes on to define it: "Where the first was characterized by stridency, anger, and the impulse to build Plath up, this one is characterized by the impulse to cut down to size and humanize an over-mythified icon." But our goals are a bit different. We want to think about how the culture imagines a teenage girl poet, and how useful or destructive that stereotype has been in our own development as poets. Plath has come to be the "teenage girl poet" icon; what's behind all of that?

Writing in 1978, Sandra M. Gilbert understood the dual nature of the Plath myth. In "'A Fine, White Flying Myth': Confessions of a Plath Addict," she identifies the mythic persona Plath created in the *Ariel* poems, but also investigates the myth of "*Sylvia Plath*" (1989, 56). The italics are Gilbert's, and she uses them to note that *Sylvia Plath* is the text—not the woman, not the poet, not Esther Greenwood, but all of them at once. They are still, as they have been since 1963, too knotted to separate.

AG: Gilbert goes on to encapsulate the Plath myth thusly: take an ambitious, intelligent, middle class young woman; impose the standard cultural expectations of niceness and beauty on her; don't forget the fact that because she is an artist, she's a bit mentally unstable to begin with; throw in some kids and a bad marriage for good measure; wait for the inevitable train wreck.

BK: Again, the biography is inseparable from the art. In Christine Jeffs' 2003 film *Sylvia*, that title announces its intention to deal with the life, not the work. (Of course, the Plath estate didn't allow Jeffs to include any poem excerpts, but that's a different conversation.) A quick trip to Wikipedia reveals subheadings like "Sylvia's Life" and "Other works on Sylvia."

I wonder—are teenage girls reading her poetry, or just reading *The Bell Jar* and watching the movie *Sylvia*? In high school in the 1990s, I knew teachers who assigned *The Bell Jar.* But no one ever assigned *Ariel*. Maybe, as O'Rourke suggests, young women are misreading what they've never really read. Perhaps they're only reading the text *Sylvia Plath* as some kind of shorthand for (and glamorization of) teenage depression and self-destruction.

AG: Participation in that sloppy shorthand is perhaps inescapable when what it stands for is so present; even those of us who do read Plath carefully make the mistake, as you revealed in your anecdote about orientation. In *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen's character notes, "Sylvia Plath—interesting poetess whose tragic suicide was misinterpreted as romantic by the college-girl mentality." The use of the word "poetess" aside, I think this characterization gets to something important: Plath *is* an interesting writer, and one who was thwarted, not helped, by her depression and circumstances. And now she is also thwarted by her reputation—and the "mentality" that lives on in the popular imagination.

What does it mean that as young poet girls, our primary role model is Plath, a "romantic" suicide? The riot grrl band Bikini Kill has a song about this on a 1996 album, *Reject All American*, called "Bloody Ice Cream": "The Sylvia Plath story is told to girls who write/ They want us to think that to be a girl poet/ Means you have to die/ Who is it/ That told me/ All girls who write must suicide?/ I've another good one for you/ We are turning/ Cursive letters into knives." Even after many celebrated women poets have had long, strong careers and lived full lives, the model that still gets held up to the light is Sylvia Plath.

Psychologist James C. Kaufman coined the term "Sylvia Plath effect" in 2001 to refer to how "poets—and in particular female poets—were more likely than fiction writers, nonfiction writers and playwrights to have signs of mental illness, such as suicide attempts or psychiatric hospitalizations" (Bailey 2003). Does the culture

want teenage girls to see the path of writing poetry as treacherous? Do teenage girls love Plath because they find a temperamental kinship with her? Or is Plath loved by alienated teenage girls because of how her fame and fan base grew after her suicide? ("They'll love me after I'm dead! Then they'll know what a genius I was!") Or is it how she was able to write so cogently and be so ambitious for herself and yet was so deeply troubled that's held up as a fantasy, that one's art can transcend one's dysfunction? Because in some ways, that's true of Plath, too—she won all those awards, appeared to be so together.

BK: To indulge my curiosity about girl culture's Plath obsession, I sent out surveys over MySpace to young women who had Plath listed as a favorite in their "Books" section, and their replies reflect all the varying perspectives you mention above. A girl named Andrea replied with an essay she'd written for a college class that said: "Because of my own bouts with severe depression, I understood, too well, the sort of mindset that is required for such a morbid preoccupation as death. I found salvation in the tangled root of the mad elm tree that said: 'I know the bottom. I know it with my great tap root: It is what you fear. I do not fear it: I have been there.'" Darcy, a 34-year-old "writer and aspiring housewife," wrote: "She does NOT have a model life—a deep life lesson maybe, since she would be an example of all the things not to do when you are handed so many gifts." Yazmin, a 17-year-old high school student, admitted: "In some ways I do strive to be like Plath, her academic career is something I have always aspired to follow and the way that she was confident in her own abilities urges me to be that similar person."

And then there are our own stories. How did you first come to Plath?

AG: I'd been reading her poems for as long as I can remember, because my mother named me Ariel (with that spelling), and owned the book *Ariel*, and since there was a book in my house with my name on the spine, of course I read it. I kept rereading it over the

years until it started to make some sense to me. I don't know if my mother was thinking of Plath when she named me, but she may well have been: *The Bell Jar* was first published in the United States and much in the news in 1971, the year before I was born. In any case, it's been a weird serendipity for me—my birthday is three days before Sylvia's, I had the name of her famous book, and it was clear from a very young age that I was going to be a writer, since it was all I cared about and was good at.

BK: This seems like a good idea in general: always keep a copy of *Ariel* on your bookshelf, for you never know if you have a little poet on your hands! But beyond that, I'm interested in the way Plath plays into your personal mythology. If Plath helps all teenage girl writers understand themselves on a certain level, your charge to find out what you had to do with Plath held that much more urgency.

AG: While I can't deny that Plath's depression and rage were part of her appeal for me, her suicide was wrapped up with her overall glamour and ambition. Her suicide made her famous, a household name: *that*, and not the suicide itself, was appealing. The most important thing about Plath's example was that you could be a young woman and a good poet, you could think of yourself as a serious writer, your book could be published and sold: that all this was possible for a girl.

BK: And did that idea of Plath come from reading the poems or her journals?

AG: I read the poems before I read the journals, and even so I knew of that aspect of the myth: of the plans Plath had for herself, of her ego. But yes, the journals are amazing, because in them she is a *girl* poet. I held Plath's life up as a model for my own, scary model though it was. She was smart, ambitious, talented, strange, highly functional . . . like me, I wanted to believe.

BK: I want to make my own poems accessible to teenage girls because as a sixteen-year-old beginning to compose such a narrative of selfhood in my own diaries and poems, I was *starving* to find ver-

sions of myself in literature. My feminist literary interests emerged from this lack. An important turning point came in an American Literature class during my junior year of high school. We spent one day out of 180 on Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. Only 50 minutes—but still, I'm so grateful to have had "Daddy," "Her Kind," and "Diving into the Wreck" photocopied and set down in front of me at sixteen.

The thing is, Plath's poems didn't do it for me back then. I learned to read Plath in college, but in cafeterias and dorm rooms and college apartments with guitars leaning against the walls and saucers for ashtrays. Spaces surrounding the classroom, but not inside it. The poems have only begun to feel legible and relevant to me in the last two or three years, and only on the level of language. (Surely this was in part due to mal-exposure: why did the AP English exam in high school ask us to discuss "Blackberrying," not "The Applicant"? Because it seemed benign?) In that high school classroom in 1998, instead of being absorbed in "Daddy" (its sounds interested me, but I felt nothing of what the speaker felt), I was entranced by the undersea mythology of women's lives in Rich's "Diving into the Wreck." Like many teenage girls, I valued strong, "relatable" emotional content over linguistic pyrotechnics.

AG: Are you saying that younger readers—or, really, typical readers of all ages—prefer something visceral and aesthetically transparent over something linguistically complex? Because I think the average school-age child is prone to love the latter, but quickly taught to fear what is complicated, cryptic or difficult. As a child, the books that appealed most to me were those with mysterious wordplay, made-up words, absurdist images, the kind you find in nursery rhymes, in *Eloise*, in any number of good children's books. My daughter is two and her favorite books are a classic Mother Goose, which is full of arcane terms and slant rhymes, and books with repetition and alliteration. And I do think this is why Plath appealed to me more than many other poets I read as a teenager—her

words felt emotionally raw, a punch to the gut, but they were also sonically seductive, her lines twisty and incantatory.

BK: If you teach people that they can read poems for more than meaning, if you let them know that every poem is not a puzzle to solve, intimidation fades. Plath would be an ideal poet to demonstrate what a poem can do besides, say, observe nature or create an epiphanic moment about the self. But I don't think most people ever learn how to read poetry that way: the classroom teaches close reading, not pleasure. And if teenagers often read poetry in order to discover themselves reflected back up from the page, then difficult language might hinder the average teenager's ability to connect.

The girl-poet is not the average teenage reader, though. Teenage girls relate to Plath's fiery, mythic, emotionally charged persona—but you were interested in the language, too. All I was looking for as a girl-poet were the lines that described me precisely—and then the desire to describe myself and my world with precision became my creative catalyst. Rich wrote what I felt. But she published *Diving into the Wreck* in 1973, ten years after *Ariel* was completed, and a lot happened for women in those years, including the emergence of feminist poetics, and Rich's idea that such a poetics might be clear and accessible to all—presumably including teenagers.

Plus, if I didn't already know that Plath and Sexton were suicides, I quickly learned, and I also learned that Rich was still alive. In a weird way I felt proud of myself for preferring the "sane" one.

AG: You were right to be proud of yourself for this. My experience as a teenage girl poet was definitely that of favoring melodramatic and eccentric over healthy and sane. It took me until my late 20s to figure out how much better it is to be happy than sad.

BK: Isn't it funny how talk about Confessional poetry breeds confession? Many of these reactions are hard to justify without further explaining my girlhood. I was just as concerned with empowering adolescent girls then as I am now. I was constantly monitoring my—and my close female friends'—moods and decisions (probably op-

pressively so), encouraging everyone to be strong in the face of boys and other teenage girls and wavering senses of self-worth. I only ever wrote "grrrl," a spelling I believe I learned from Ani DiFranco.

AG: I was less vigilant than you were, perhaps because I was operating from a position of privilege: as one of three daughters (no sons) of a Janis Joplin-loving mother who hosted League of Women Voters meetings in our living room, feminism was the norm to me. I was expected to speak up, be smart and bold, and I was. But I was also angry, possessed of an unproductive free-floating rage, which I think helped me connect with Plath.

BK: My family was also female-dominant—four daughters born within four and a half years of each other. But I was born in the wake of, not the midst of, second-wave feminism, so a lot of things were taken for granted and remained unspoken. In other words, my sisters and I were expected to excel, and the idea that we couldn't do something because we were girls would have been ridiculous, but this attitude's relationship to feminism was never made explicit.

The idea of anger drawing you to Plath is fascinating, too, because I was admittedly a mellow, fairly well behaved teenager.

AG: I was well behaved but not mellow. I keep picturing Winona Ryder as Veronica in the movie *Heathers*, gnashing her teeth and grasping her monocle as she heaps death wishes on her high school friends in her "dear diary": that film character played a role in my life parallel to the one Plath played. I saw the movie when it came out in 1989, and like Veronica, I was a high school girl whose identity as a weirdo artsy type was already in place. I'd read Plath's journals the previous year, but *Heathers* was the first time I saw a girl who I thought was like me on screen, in popular culture, in public, not just in a book. Veronica was a writer, like Plath—a brooding, funny, mad writer. Teenage girls were not usually portrayed like this in pop culture.

I'm thinking of the cultural studies/queer theory notion of the

process of writing yourself into a book or film, of the importance of feeling "called out" or represented by a cultural text. Recognizing yourself, using the text as a mirror. Part of why Plath has had the impact she has had on young women is because of the way we feel mirrored by her, by the way she writes about her life as a disillusioned young middle-class woman. *The Bell Jar*'s Esther, and perhaps Plath's Confessional persona, are types of female Holden Caulfields. But white boys have many such books and texts to choose from; how many do young white women have? We read *A Separate Peace* and *Hamlet* in my first year of high school, both stories of young men in existential crisis. Like other literary girls, I glommed on to Ophelia, but poor Ophelia, as we all know. Gone the way of Sylvia.

BK: I'm with you on Ophelia, and I've got the poems-that-I-should-have-burned-by-now to prove it, but I've had a different reaction to the girl-poets of the movies. They always felt somehow insulting to me, and made me feel even *less* understood: *Okay, so the world knows I exist, but* this *is what they think I'm like?* Although my teenage years held their share of tortuous moments, I also met my very best friends during adolescence, and they understood me deeply. Because I was lucky enough to feel understood in real life, I felt distanced from my on-screen surrogates.

AG: I know what you mean, actually. I was also a pretty cheerful little hippie-punk-feminist, for all my temper tantrums. I had great friends, too, a bunch of very smart and progressive boys and girls, all of whom were also clever writers and readers. I was attracted to this, too, in *The Bell Jar:* the portrayal of a girl with a voice, who could express whatever she was feeling, from despair to giddy elation.

On one Plath fan blog I found (the site's name is "Morbid Visage"), the girl describes herself as "shy . . . perpetually heartbroken. Girly. Creative. Chronically depressed. Insecure. Lonely." Like a formula for Teenage Girl Poet.

Here's a thought: isn't it possible that young women's poetry is no better or worse than young men's poetry? Wasn't Rimbaud pretty melancholy and pretentious himself at times? Aren't we all? Plath's poems transcend her psychological problems and are often brilliant, witty and poised. So how is it that we've come to see loving Plath as a kind of shameful rite of passage?

BK: "Loving" vs. "shameful"—I think your language here gives away part of the answer. Because what is teenage girlhood if not bound up in love and shame? Adolescent girls are our culture's premier self-torturers, and the culture encourages this through advertising and marketing campaigns. We know the traditional explanation for the self-destructive behavior of adolescent girls: because all girls can't be blonde, beautiful, glamorous, and thin, they punish themselves by starving, binging, purging, or cutting. Plath's appeal must have a lot to do with the fact that her story conflates glamour (beautiful, blonde famous poet . . .) with destruction (. . . kills herself).

The structure of *The Bell Jar* echoes these two poles. When I reread the novel in preparation for our discussion, I was shocked to find myself uncomplicatedly entertained by the first several chapters: a smart, cynical college girl in the midst of the vapid New York fashion magazine world. Esther raises her eyebrows at everyone, and her behavior is also hilarious and *real:* she hoards caviar at luncheons, breaks out in sobs during photo shoots, and exits hired limos in the middle of the street in order to find the "authentic" New York.

But the second half of the novel veers into stifling suburbs and sterile mental hospitals. So we get this fissure, this cracked self that has room for both glamour and self-destruction. Middle-class white girls know this intimately, and Plath renders it perfectly. The *Ariel* poems might not fit this paradigm quite as neatly as *The Bell Jar*, but it's not hard to see that a poetic speaker who presents herself as mythically powerful and ruthlessly despairing could seduce a teenage girl in a similar way.

AG: She has an "outlaw" mystique, which few women writers do. It's interesting to think about whether the writers beloved by young adults in smoky cafés are the ones we are also supposed to "get over."

BK: The male equivalent would be getting over Charles Bukowski.

AG: Yes, white girls have Plath, and white boys steal copies of Bukowski, Burroughs, Hunter S. Thompson. None of these guys were exactly *sane*, but they outlived Plath, managed to become men, fully men, with powerful careers while they were alive. Even Holden Caulfield was the product of an adult's imagination, filtered through the distance time allows. Plath remains in the thick of her troubles, in suspended adolescence. As Janet Malcolm writes in *The Silent Woman*, "She will never reach the age when the tumults of young adulthood can be looked back upon with rueful sympathy and without anger and vengefulness" (1995, 7).

BK: And because she was seen as juvenile, we were immature if we still read her. Juvenile, immature, adolescent—Plath is equated with all of these. But sometimes I think it isn't about immaturity at all: maybe it's about danger. The explicit cultural code—that "unwritten handbook for teenage writers"—calls Plath "juvenile" when the implicit script is that she's a woman unregulated, and that's the real reason we're shooed away from her.

The *Ariel* Poems

AG: The recognition that one could be such a good girl and yet also so dark and dangerous—that in fact this wild fluctuation in moods and personas is often the experience of young women, or of writers, or of those of us who struggle with depression or anxiety, and the overlap between these—was part of what was familiar and needed for me in *The Bell Jar*, and in Plath's work in general. But when I go back and look at Plath's work as an adult, I am struck not by what seems dangerous but by her ability to *craft* the fever of her emotions

into verse: poems with an incredible ear for the natural cadences of contemporary English, poems that turn on a dime, that employ bold and rich figurative language. So she did have distance, obviously. That's what makes the poems and *The Bell Jar* great. They are not "vomit on a page," to invoke that lovely adage about confessional narrative, or writing-as-therapy; they are not, in M. D. Uroff's words, "uninformed cries from the heart" (1977). They are "superbly controlled." And more often than not, they do not include any transparent autobiographical detail at all.

This has been pointed out in many critical essays, and the debate around the term "Confessional" is well documented in Uroff's essay "Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration," in which the critic reminds us that no sooner had M. L. Rosenthal lumped Plath in with Robert Lowell than Ted Hughes rebuked the label, pointing out how "emblematic" her work was compared to Lowell's. Marjorie Perloff claims that Plath's poems lack "realistic detail," a necessary quality of a Confessional poem; Uroff calls the characters in her poems "generalized figures." Uroff also makes the argument that Lowell was using his poems to heal himself, and to represent his own weaknesses, but Plath was borrowing from her experiences to create speakers uninterested in personal growth.

BK: I've always had the hunch that Plath was less "confessional" than I was taught to believe. Just because we happen to know an incredible amount about her life doesn't mean all of those "true" details show up in the work! And the poems in *Ariel* prove it.

AG: In "The Applicant," the poem functions more as an extended metaphor—marriage as a job—than as anything revealing about Plath's life. It's interested in being generic, actually: the whole idea is that marriage, jobs, women are generic, as can be seen in the use of the pronoun "it" instead of "she" or a name (Plath 2004, 11-12). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther sees two models for womanhood in her world: the tough-talking, unmarried career woman, epitomized by Jay Cee, the editor at the fashion magazine; or a suburban house-

wife, epitomized by Dodo Conway, the neighbor pushing the baby carriage in front of her mother's home. The speaker in "The Applicant" is the former.

But "The Applicant" is not an entirely clear metaphor. Sometimes, as in the line "My boy, it's your last resort" (Plath 2004, 12) it seems that the speaker/employer is talking to a young bachelor "applying" for a wife, but when the poem asks in the opening stanza if the "you" wears "rubber breasts" (11) it seems that the poem is speaking to the young bride-to-be. "Stop crying," the speaker scolds, and ". . . your head, excuse me, is empty": these tell me that the "you" is a woman (11). I end up thinking that the poem switches back and forth between speaking to a bride and a groom. This interesting conflation, or confusion, often happens in the *Ariel* poems. It's a confusion paralleled in the poem's form: "The Applicant," although it plays with true and slant end rhymes throughout, switches between longer, more lyric lines like "To thumb shut your eyes at the end/ And dissolve of sorrow" to conversational, prosaic moments like "Stop crying./ Open your hand" (11).

BK: I see the speaker in "The Applicant" as a matchmaker, most likely female, and the applicant as the addressee, a husband-to-be. His potential marriage candidate doesn't actually enter the poem until the line "Come here sweetie, out of the closet," over halfway through the poem (Plath 2004, 12). It is the future bride in the closet, and she is "naked as paper," lacking worth ("But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,/ In fifty, gold") (12). The closet is not a place of fearful hiding (from one's own sexuality or anything else), but of play, hide-and-go-seek. The act of emerging from the closet is an exit from childhood, a threshold moment. No longer "naked," but wearing doll clothes, the garments of convention. There's also a more subversive, funnier interpretation—the matchmaker might have women stored like office products in her supply closet.

AG: This reading makes sense: the speaker is talking both to the male applicant and to the office supply-wife she's keeping in her

closet. What about this poem might resonate for a teenage girl reader? Teenage girls, even today, see marriage looming ahead of them in the not-too-distant future, seductive and terrifying. In "The Applicant," a blank woman—an automaton, à la *The Stepford Wives*, made up from bits of real women but programmed "to bring teacups" and "do whatever you tell it"—is being outfitted for her life as a wife, but the marriage is also her death: the "black and stiff" suit offered will shield one from "fire and bombs through the roof" but the speaker also warns, "believe me, they'll bury you in it" (Plath 2004, 11).

BK: From the first line of "The Applicant," there is insider/outsider rhetoric, an idea central to the adolescent experience. The first three lines of the poem read: "First, are you our sort of person?/ Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth, or a crutch[?]" (Plath 2004, 11). Contrary to what we'd expect—that these defects would keep the applicant *out* of the club—the fact that he doesn't have any of them frustrates the matchmaker: "No, no? Then/ How can we give you a thing?" (11). The organization that the matchmaker administers seems to be a club for freaks. It's as if the applicant has to be defective in order for a wife to please him, mend his wounds, or otherwise change him.

The idea of the defective applicant says a lot about male-female relationships, but it also speaks to the adolescent girl's psyche. She's learning how to interact with boys, trying to figure out where she is on the beautiful/acceptable/freakish continuum. She's trying to figure out if she's "normal." No one tells her it's okay for a teenage girl to be "unfinished"—a body in process, messy, incomplete. No one ever told me that. There's the female makeover fantasy—Cinderella and *Clueless*. These narratives can be read simultaneously as "makeovers" and coming-of-age stories: the suggestion is that for girls, there is no difference.

AG: Is the line "it can sew, it can cook" still relevant to the teenage girl imagining marriage? While no one I know takes home ec any-

more, there's been a huge resurgence of "the domestic arts"—young women knitting and scrapbooking, and "domestic goddesses" like Nigella Lawson and Rachael Ray. While I think—hope—that young women today imagine that cooking and cleaning and keeping a home are *options*, not requirements, someone does have to clean the house, get food on the dinner table, do the laundry. These tasks have not disappeared, and what I see among women in my community is that even if both husband and wife work equally high-powered jobs that keep them out of the home much of the day, it falls upon the woman to arrange for someone *else* to clean, cook, raise the children, etc.

As I go back to read *Ariel* in its restored edition—the edition we're looking at here—now that I'm a wife and mother, I'm amazed at how many of these poems are about marriage, divorce, childbirth, and child-raising. I don't feel like *Ariel* is usually received as a book about motherhood, but it is. And marriage and motherhood are fraught issues for girls on the cusp of womanhood, but unlike "The Applicant," a lot of the *Ariel* poems feel written from so deep inside relationships to husband and children that I'd imagine them to be hard for teenage readers to grasp. They were for me. I never really appreciated "Morning Song" until after my daughter was born, and now its first few lines often run through my head as I go about my day.

BK: Sylvia played dutiful wife, mother, cook, and homemaker for years. Of course there are more visible role models for girls these days, but I wonder how much the practical options have changed. Does *not* accepting the roles of wife and mother mean a girl remains in a state of perpetual adolescence? And suggest that she hasn't matured? Do today's adolescent girls feel Plath's sense of entrapment? Many women don't even consider getting married until the age at which Plath took her own life: at thirty, her adolescence was well over. As you know—and as I've been taught to fear—it's not all that much easier these days for motivated, high-achieving women to have careers and be mothers. In fact, since most households need to

have two wage-earners to survive economically, it might be even harder.

AG: In an entry on Plath for *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers* (!) by Mary Lowe-Evans, the author writes in regard to *The Bell Jar:* "Esther's reactions to [being asked to choose between marriage/motherhood and a career] may seem excessive [today], [but] in the 1950s, a gifted, intellectual woman like Esther had to make choices that might have contributed to the 'splitting' of an already tenuous personality" (1994). I'd say, from experience and from all the evidence of books on the subject of the white "mommy wars" recently published, this "split" may have evolved, but it has not gone away for women in cultural positions similar to Esther's and Plath's. Why did I, when thinking about becoming pregnant, think about Plath again and again, in real fear? I have a graduate degree, a tenure-track job, a progressive partner. Why did I spend much of my pregnancy obsessing over news reports of infanticide and other acts of postpartum psychosis?

BK: As much as I want to be a mother one day, I've always been terrified of the idea, equating it with the end of a relatively carefree life that includes room for creative output: the end of my girlhood. So if I push this logic further, girl *equals* poet, *equals* artist, because the fear (and sometimes the reality) is that these things cease to exist in a pure sense when a girl-poet becomes a mom-poet. In her girl studies book *Future Girl*, Anita Harris includes an appendix—"Who Is a Girl?"—which reminds us that definitions of girlhood are constantly changing. About "contemporary Western young womanhood" in particular she writes: "[G]irlhood is not perceived to be entirely completed until the mid- to late twenties, owing to the extension of education, the end of the job for life, and the trend toward later-life motherhood and deferral of long-term relationships" (2004, 191-92). What makes me nervous (and I don't mean nervous intellectually; I mean nervous because I am twenty-five years old) is the fact that Harris is mostly describing a delay of this "split," not a

society that has healed it. Her words—*extension, later-life, deferral*—underscore a deep-rooted anxiety. Just as the living doll in "The Applicant" couldn't have just stayed in the closet, eventually women have to choose *something*. (And if they don't choose? Is that madness?) Because there is still no good solution to the "How can you be a mother and a wife and have a career and be an artist at the same time?" question, the most popular solution is to postpone the quandary. But then what?

AG: For Plath, suicide.

Let's look at "Lady Lazarus," many people's favorite and one of the best-known poems. Yes, "Lady Lazarus" is a poem about Plath's several brushes with death, and suicide attempts. But the speaker is also very aware of her body as a public freak show, one that "[t]he peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see" (Plath 2004, 15). Suicide attempts are the end of a spectrum of self-destructive ways to make people notice your pain, including eating disorders and cutting, so I can imagine how this poem would appeal to girls struggling with these behaviors. It's also part of the whole romance or glamour of unhappiness, that myth we keep talking about.

I did love this poem as a teenager, perhaps because of how it chronicles the intensity of discovering how your body is public property, open to scrutiny from all sides, with enormous expectations and rules heaped on it. That was terrifying for me then, and it is often what is behind anorexia and other self-destructive behaviors girls enact upon their bodies: this desire to control and punish your contested physical self. In this way, "Lady Lazarus" is a Confessional poem, because Rosenthal uses the term to describe work that, as noted by Caroline King Barnard Hall in *Sylvia Plath, Revised*, "makes . . . the private psychological vulnerability at the poem's center a cultural symbol" (1998, 124). And perhaps this is what makes Plath so enduring a figure to teenage girls—she takes that very personal pain and transforms it into something grand, and something important to the whole culture.

BK: And that transformation is not a clear epiphany that happens in the last quarter of the poem, like you see in many unconvincing Confessional poems. Instead, the change is embodied throughout the entire poem in Plath's charged tone, rhythm, diction, and imagery. The "private psychological vulnerability"—in "Lady Lazarus," references to suicide attempts—is there, and at points we seem to have the "real" Plath speaking to us, not a persona. But more often Plath uses her speakers—the matchmaker, the applicant, the daughter—to transfigure that vulnerability. Not to break free from the emotion, not to see the "use" in it (those seem like more stereotypically Confessional epiphanies), but to truly *mold* it. I can only imagine how much psychic energy it must have taken to create the marvel that is *Ariel*—poems that are the product of alchemy that even the most cynical teenager can trust.

In "Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry," Uroff considers this transformative faculty in a different way: "[Plath] is casting out her terrors so that she can control them . . . she is projecting her destruction outward" (1977). Plath's use of autobiographical material has a twofold purpose, then: it creates a myth of the self in the poems, and it quells the mad or freakish aspects of her own psyche. For Uroff, all of this adds up to the fact that Plath's poems are *not* Confessional; she is not merely exploring, not shamefully admitting something—she's defiant.

In a section on Plath scholarship's relationship to feminism, Hall quotes Alicia Ostriker's reflection on Plath, which speaks to this act of transformation: "At the same moment as we are pulling ourselves from martyrdom's shadows to some sort of daylight, we honor her for being among the first to run a flashlight over the cave walls" (1998, 126). This speaks to the metamorphosis from adolescence to adulthood, and it is this sense of transformation that can be empowering to girls and especially girl-poets. Confessional and "you go, girl!" poems serve a purpose, but they can feel static on the page; they don't take the riskier step that Plath does, launching into a

mythic persona that absorbs and transfigures the emotion that might have been merely "confessed."

As with most Plath poems, the psychological portrait of "Lady Lazarus" is not tidy. The famous final stanza ("Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air" [2004, 17]) conjures the image of the phoenix, a symbol of rebirth echoed in the title. But rebirth is associated with hope, and it is impossible to read the entire poem as hopeful. The speaker has already told us about her failed suicide attempts, so this autobiographical detail becomes a way for Plath to complicate the ideas of Lazarus and the phoenix: what we thought was miraculous and inspiring has an ominous quality: what returns is a monster who wants to "eat men." This is transformation, but it would be difficult to call it "useful" or "inspiring" for teenage girls: the speaker derives it from turning a masochistic impulse into a sadistic one. Girls can read humor into the final stanza (and teenage poet girls can undoubtedly have pretty dark senses of humor). But if girls feel that they need poetry that empowers them to transcend their unhappiness, then this is no answer.

AG: I'm not convinced that girl readers need empowering poetry. I think Ostriker's metaphor of Plath's "running a flashlight over the cave walls" is what I want: the act of testifying to the experience of girlhood may be all that is required or desired. Poems that bear witness, but do not necessarily offer solace or solutions.

BK: And of course, different girls want different things, as we did.

Lady Lazarus' baring of her "scars" (and charging for viewing them) and performance of a "big strip tease" also interest me in relation to teenage girls. If we return to Uroff's assertion that Plath's poems externalize her pain, projecting her destruction onto the page, then it seems that of all Plath's personae, Lady Lazarus performs this most explicitly. But teenage writer girls have a gift that other girls don't—they can externalize/transform their strong emotions on the page instead of physically manifesting them. (The relationship between text and the body in women's writing is its own in-

triguing subject, often connected through metaphor to purging and externalization.) I think of the riot grrrls writing words like "SLUT" and "BITCH" in magic marker on their arms. This behavior is less harmful and more playful than actually hurting oneself, and it's confrontational and empowering in its own way (some of that power comes through humor, as in Plath).

AG: On the other hand, a poem like "The Jailor" might be the kind one imagines appealing to angst-ridden, black-clad teens. "I have been drugged and raped," the speaker says, plainly, although elsewhere in the poem it seems the drugs are sleeping pills the speaker took voluntarily (Plath 2004, 23). By the end, the speaker admits her codependence on her jailor-rapist (who also seems to be her husband, or possibly her mental illness): "What would the dark/ Do without fevers to eat? . . . what would he/ Do, do, do without me" (24). This kind of dramatic martyrdom, this interest in her own pain, feels very adolescent to me.

BK: It feels that way to me, too. Plath's conflations can often complicate in a good way, as in "The Applicant," but this combination of jailor, rapist, husband, and self feels obvious and stale—*not* transformative.

Like its characters, the tone of "The Jailor" tone is jumbled, too. In some cases we have characteristically shocking declarations ("The fever trickles and stiffens in my hair" [Plath 2004, 23]), but in others we have lines that come off almost sentimentally: "I am myself. That is not enough" (23). "The Jailor" does what many people think a Sylvia Plath poem does all the time—it wallows in its own misery. Although the unrelenting darkness of "The Jailor" might appeal to a teenage girl—or anyone—in a certain self-pitying mood, it ultimately doesn't present an empowered or transformed speaker, nor does it achieve any psychic distance from anger and sadness.

AG: I think its downfall as a poem is precisely this: not its lack of transformation or its inability to cheer on readers, but its absence of distance that makes the metaphors muddy and the tone self-pitying.

What Kind of Poetry Do Adolescent Girls Want and Need?

AG: Who did teenage girls read before they read Plath? Plath herself actually offers some answers in her *Unabridged Journals* (2000). From the March 29, 1958 entry (she was 26):

> Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America. . . . Who rivals? Well, in history—Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell & Marianne Moore, the ageing giantesses & poetic godmothers . . . May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, & most close, Adrienne Cecile Rich—who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems. (Plath and Kukil 2000, 360)

Some of these are not read as widely as Plath is by teenage girls—or by anyone—today. Sitwell and Gardner certainly not. Millay and Browning and especially Dickinson still hold great power and are read, I'd imagine, by young women poets. I read them, and tried to read Rossetti. Rich is, I think, still the "most close"—as you said, Becca, she was an important poet for you as a teenager.

BK: Yes, and a few lines from her "Letters to a Young Poet" speak to our discussion:

> I wanted to go somewhere
> the brain had not yet gone
> I wanted not to be
> there so alone
> (Rich 1999, 29)

I read the enjambed third line as an existential declaration. Rich lives on, but not without having experienced the pain of wanting "not to be." It's the aloneness that's the source of the dilemma. Plath felt isolated in a more extreme way. Perhaps the greatest thing po-

etry could do for teenage girls, then, is let them know that they're not alone. This might sound like psychobabble, but it can happen on all sorts of levels—emotional, intellectual, linguistic. Girls can see themselves in a text as recognizable and articulable, readable and writeable; and this, in turn, shows the girl-poet that she can perform all of these things, too.

AG: But what do these girls want from poetry, and what kind of poetry do we want for these girls? In an essay subtitled "A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies" by Beth Cooper Benjamin and Janie Victoria Ward, the authors "map a series of shifts in the study of girls' development in the United States since the 1990s" and point out how girls' studies has shifted from thinking about ways women and feminists in the culture can aid and protect and mentor girls to focusing on the culture produced by the girls themselves (2004, 15). The authors take issue with how, as it has evolved as a scholarly field, girls' studies denies the impact of girls' "psychosocial development" on "issues in adult women's lives" (16).

In other words, if we were to parallel this with our essay, we'd ignore how Plath's work affects girl readers or how it's made us who we are or how it was a product of its own culture and focus instead on the poems and journals girls themselves are writing now. We're not doing this, obviously, but neither are we trying to heed Mary Pipher's call in *Reviving Ophelia*, one of the landmark books of early girls' studies, "to build a culture that is less complicated and more nurturing, less violent and sexualized and more growth-producing" (1994, 13). I will speak for myself here: I would not characterize my own poetry as helping that cause. Aesthetically, I strive for complication, and do not shy away from violence or sexualization, even—especially?—in my own descriptions of the experience of girlhood.

BK: We're both wary of entering into a therapy-culture discourse as well as hesitant to think that the girls themselves have all the answers stored away in their diaries. Maybe this is the attitude of the

teacher, as opposed to the therapist (or doting mother, or "life coach"). It's the idea that you can expose a student to a text and offer insights, but ultimately she'll have to make her own meaning.

AG: In Ward and Benjamin's essay, they point to the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Adolescent Girls: Strengths and Stresses report from 1999 and its argument that "when we focus on 'fixing the girl' to the exclusion of 'fixing the culture,' we lose sight of the systemic problems underlying individual girls' developmental concerns" (2004, 24). And this makes me think that these are the poems we should be identifying for readership by teen girls: those that point out what's wrong with the culture, not necessarily what's wrong with the girl. Or, as the ones Plath wrote so beautifully—and perhaps this is the key to her appeal?!—poems that see what is wrong with the girl as emblematic of or metaphoric for what's wrong with the culture. The way the cause and the effect—the culture and the messed-up girl—is another thing that gets conflated in Plath, so that neither is a clear-cut perpetrator or victim, is what is so moving and lasting about Plath's work.

BK: Anita Harris' argument in *Future Girl* is that Western society holds up young women as emblems of the future: we are fascinated with girls because they tell us something about where we're going as a culture. Harris writes that "it is becoming increasingly difficult for young women to live outside the spotlight," and that the "regulatory gaze" cast on women's voices and stories "demands an exposure of interiority that leaves little of young women's lives to themselves" (2004, 132).

I had this idea in mind when I was browsing *The New York Times* online last weekend and noticed that the number-one most-emailed article from the Sunday edition was Sara Rimer's "For Girls, It's Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too." Rimer followed a group of girls at an elite public high school in Newton, MA (a Boston suburb; Plath grew up about 6 miles away) during their senior year. Ostensibly, she was writing an article about the cutthroat college admissions

process, but what emerged was a story of "Girls who do everything: Varsity sports. Student government. Theater. Community service. Girls who have grown up learning they can do anything a boy can do, which is anything they want to do" (2007). Rimer dubs them "Amazing Girls," and no doubt Plath would have been one of them, had she lived now.

Although the article critiques the culture that puts pressure on young women to succeed at everything, it stops short of revealing, or even wondering about, the deeper psychic strain the girls might experience. The student who becomes the focus of the piece, Esther (!), has parents who have made cultivating a spiritual life a priority. In Esther's mother's words, Newton parents' primary concern should be that their children don't have "anorexia of the soul." It's a startling phrase, one that conflates a girls' disease with spirituality. Rimer implies that Esther, the one girl in Newton who seems to have her priorities straight, avoids "girl disease" through community service with her local youth group. Meanwhile, Esther's friend Colby has a list of 35 goals scrawled in pink ink in her journal, one of which includes "write a really good poem." Poetry isn't a passion or pastime—it's a goal. (By the end of the article Esther has been rejected by Williams but accepted at Smith, and the Plath parallels become almost absurd.)

But if girls don't need an antidote to angst, if they don't need "girl power," then do they need, as you say, to see themselves in the culture and the culture in them, and to see their own symptoms as cultural symptoms? As I was writing the mission statement for the feminist press I co-founded, Switchback Books, I was thinking of this: we don't need women *telling* us that we are powerful; we need powerful voices that shock us into realizing that, to use Rich's words, "There is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored" (1979, 35).

AG: I always eschewed literature that offered clear answers or overt messages in favor of that which was slippery and sly. I wanted to be

beguiled, not rescued. In high school I was nuts about James Joyce, Tom Stoppard, and Francesca Lia Block, who have perhaps nothing else in common but an interest in the textures and doubleness of language and the use of humor and literary tricks to represent the human condition. In any case, I wouldn't want to rescue teenage girls via poetry: the idea of such a rescue, or even a "you go, girl!" message, denies them agency and dismisses the depth and complexity of their experiences and feelings. I'd rather see—or create—a poetry that acknowledges the Gothic and wallowing tendencies of white teens while admitting the limits and ridiculousness of all that, examining those self-destructive feelings without trying to cheer or erase them out of existence. Poems that imagine teenage girl readers to be sophisticated and self-aware, and to have a sense of humor about themselves.

BK: So much of what has been written about girls in the last twenty years or so comes out of our Oprah/therapy culture, so in a way it's hard to separate the idea of helping teenage girls by giving them poetry that nourishes them from helping teenage girls build their self-esteem. But beyond real-life reflection, girls also need imaginative ways out. Persona poems, surrealist narratives, fragmented utterances (Plath, Plath, Plath)—all of these can create new worlds for girls to step into. So, I'm promoting two different types of poems: the cultural poem, overtly rooted in this world; and the imaginative poem, which creates a new world. Happily, they're both being written, and with great frequency. The excitement of contemporary poetry is that these things are happening now and happening everywhere.

Contemporary Poetry for Girls: A Sampler

AG: We're lucky to have a wealth of women's poetry in the past few decades: poetry not only by women but about women and women's issues. Poets like Anne Waldman, Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer,

C. D. Wright, Kathleen Fraser, Claudia Rankine, Jean Valentine, Sonia Sanchez, Heather McHugh, Rita Dove, Joy Harjo and Lucia Perillo have written adventurous, revelatory poems while also representing the fact that women poets can have long lives, beyond a first book or second book: that a woman poet can mature and come into very different concerns. There is no longer only the Plath model of writing a couple brilliant books and sticking one's head in an oven.

But since we're talking specifically about recent writing that might be suitable for teenagers, let's focus on a bunch of poets who are quite young—in their 30s or early 40s, with just a few books out. To lay the groundwork, let's first take a look at a couple of poets in the generation just before that.

BK: Kim Addonizio is a poet teenage girls may have already heard of. Her poem "Siamese" in *Tell Me* (2000, 30) describes two best friends watching female Siamese twins on TV. The prose poem begins: "They were teenaged girls, joined, it appeared, just above the right eyebrow of each, so that they faced opposite directions." The speaker is telling the story retrospectively, and we learn that her best friend would later develop a "tumor that turned out to be malignant, inoperable." The rest of the poem's narrative—in which the girls pretend to be the Siamese twins and flail about the room—plays out against the backdrop of this detail. The poem casts a light on the goofy, bizarre, irreverent play that often accompanies female friendship. Sleepovers have never been only about pedicures and prank calls, but few writers choose to capture the stranger side of girls' play and ritual.

AG: Denise Duhamel is another poet some teenage girls come in contact with, if they're lucky. Duhamel writes prolifically about teenage girlhood experiences—eating disorders, for example—with a wry candor that belies the poems' painful subject matter. Her poem "Sometimes the First Boys Don't Count," collected in *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (2001, 4), describes an adolescent

sexual experience with someone the speaker doesn't claim to love or "even want to talk to . . . the next day in school." Towards the end of the poem, the speaker goes to the "garage in [his] backyard" and sees a pin-up calendar on the wall. The poem continues:

> Your dad looked at me the same way you did,
> but that was how I wanted to be looked at then—that was how
> I thought it should be.

The last lines of the poem are at once funny, sad and brutal:

> A few days later
> I held your penis as though it were a science experiment
> and put it in my mouth when you asked. A kind of aspic squirted out.
> I swallowed it like a brave girl, taking her medicine.
>
> (Duhamel 2001, 4)

This kind of admission—the speaker is neither a victim nor an aggressor, but "a brave girl"—reminds me of *The Bell Jar*'s Esther, who has the self-awareness to understand the absurdity of heterosexual adolescent courting rituals, but not the power to remove herself from them. Duhamel's poem avoids melodrama, and is wonderfully complicated about the teenage girl speaker's attitude and desire. A poem like this, which documents but does not judge any of its characters, seems particularly useful for a teenage reader.

BK: It's also a poem whose *speaker* is looking back at her teenage years without judgment. This tone of knowing tenderness toward one's past self isn't always present in poems about adolescent escapades (especially those of the sexual variety): more often we get "I was so young—what did I know"—a hint of embarrassment or condescension toward the poet-speaker's younger self. That sort of poem doesn't describe teenage experiences: it describes adult attitudes toward these experiences, and teenagers, sensitive to patroniz-

ing tones, can tell the difference. But even when Duhamel is recounting the gaze of her fifteen-year-old boyfriend and her dad in their garage, it's we readers, not Duhamel, who infuse a sense of pathos or vulnerability. She presents the events with a perfectly matter-of-fact, clinical tone (exactly the way Esther Greenwood's sexual encounters with Buddy conjure images of beakers and formaldehyde for her).

In that prompt response I wrote for your poetry workshop, I admitted that I hoped my poems could be appealing to non-poet readers in general, and to teenage girls in particular, without being "dumbed down." I listed certain poets—among them Olena Kalytiak Davis, Brenda Shaughnessy, and Cate Marvin—who seemed to be able to achieve just that: complexity and accessibility. In the margin, you wrote: "Plath!" I hadn't been thinking of her, but as soon as you made the connection, I saw that poets like Davis, Shaughnessy, and Marvin were at once the poetic descendents of Plath *and* poets whose language, tone, and subject matter might appeal to teenage girls.

In Davis's "Resolutions in a Parked Car," from her first book, *And Her Soul Out of Nothing* (1997, 23-24), we find a woman stewing in her own melodrama, describing how she is "pleading," "screaming," "howling," and "spitting," supplicating her unnamed auditor (most likely the reader):

> Please, I beg you,
> perform some crazy rite over me so things can either
> finally dissolve or finally become solid.
>
> (Davis 1997, 23)

Like Plath's speakers in *Ariel*, Davis's speaker is in a desperate state, and chooses not to recollect such a moment in tranquility, but to speak directly from the core of her heartache. As in Plath, Davis's speaker succumbs to melodrama, but the poem doesn't.

AG: Yes, the poem is able to be *about* "crying in rental cars" and "feeling like throwing up" at the same time that it feels like it's in the midst of that emotional state. It has *perspective*, as they say, without losing any of the power of the moment lived: it knows that "Sweetheart, Death is the least of it" (Davis 1997, 23).

BK: This seems to be the challenge particular to writing poems for/about teenage girls: how do you write about melodrama or write drama into your poem without letting it all dissolve into treacle?

AG: In our poetry program, Davis's work has a huge fan following among students of all backgrounds. Part of the reason for this, I'm sure, is her ability to write in the midst of that state, the glamour of that kind of intensity. I'm glad you picked a car poem to talk about for Davis, because I've said that Davis's work chronicles emotional car wrecks, very Confessional ones, narrated in first person, and the raw nakedness of autobiographical emotion and situation—as well as the ability to write beautifully, playfully, lyrically, innovatively about it—are a huge part of her appeal. Again, so much like Plath's.

But it's completely unlike Plath's appeal in one very significant way, because Davis and all these other young poets are, of course, still alive. I think, for example, of Rachel Zucker's latest poems, which document some of the same struggles Plath was documenting: the difficulties of marriage, the transition to motherhood, anxiety and depression. But although Zucker's poems don't claim any of it is easy (and in fact sometimes reference pharmaceutical assistance), they persevere. Zucker's and Davis's poems do not shout "you go, girl," but they—the poems, the poets—are not choosing suicide, either.

BK: And it's still true that the choices in poem-making are more varied than the choices in life, even if this fact can't ultimately save everyone. Cate Marvin has another answer to the question of how you deal with strong emotional content: You let the speaker's rage become so palpable that the reader gets caught up in it. Out of those

that we'll discuss here, Marvin is the poet who most recalls Plath's dark, angry humor. Consider the first stanza of her "Weather to Reel For":

> You could have wasted someone
> else's time, but you chose mine, darling,
> and I'll never regret those nights lying
> like an organ separate and packed in ice, on a flight
> to the failing patient who needed me most.
>
> (Marvin 2001, 22)

Acrid, spiteful, incensed—and hilarious. The poem, which works with an extended metaphor that compares a past relationship with a town destroyed by a tornado, is aware of its obsession with drama and disaster. As the initially symmetrical stanzas grow into a jagged twister of their own, and the speaker walks around "wanting/ but not knowing what," Marvin writes: "O, drama. /Your red sun which never/ sets but has kept/ my hide burnt with wakefulness" (2001, 23). This self-reflexive moment tells us that however rage-enveloped the speaker may be, she can still craft her feelings into careful stanzas. Like Plath, Marvin achieves a crucial distance from her speaker, the former funneling what the latter fuels.

AG: We live in a time when many young women poets have that crucial distance, by writing and living past their adolescence, documenting both that moment and the moments that follow, something Plath could not do.

Beth Ann Fennelly, a narrative poet whose work is both accessible and searing, has a poem called "Turning Twenty-Nine," in which she writes, "Time nicks us all/ sooner or later; that's democracy" (2001, 425). The poem is about how the girl we are when we are young can feel remarkably, uncomfortably like the person we are when we are no longer young. "Don't you hate it/ when high school's right?" she asks. The poem is very hard on the self, in a

healthy, good-humored, Esther Greenwood way. This witty self-effacement rarely showed up in Plath's poetry, though.

BK: It's almost as if the language wouldn't let it—the difference between narrative forms and experimental or lyric modes. In some ways it's hard to make a case for narrative poets being good for girls in the same way that Plath is. I suppose several of the bee poems at the end of *Ariel* have a narrative structure, as does "Lesbos" (interestingly, some of these are poems that were shuffled in and out of the manuscript when Ted Hughes published the first editions of *Ariel* in the U.S. and U.K.). But mostly Plath seeks that mythic consciousness, something that is attractive to young women in a completely different way than a poem that seeks to confess what the speaker did in the woods on her first date. Plath's poems, however "Confessional," don't give this type of detail. So, although many different aesthetics may be attractive to teenage girls, not all of these poems descend directly from the *Ariel* work. Instead they descend from the public misconception of those poems as raw narrative confession. As you've said, Arielle, what people mistakenly think Plath did in her work is actually what Sharon Olds did two decades later.

AG: Yes, I'm sorry we don't have more room here to talk about Olds, because I do think she is, in a chronological as well as topical sense, the most direct descendent of Plath, and someone who is often vital for the teenage girl readers who discover her work. Although there are huge dissimilarities, Olds seems to pick up on one strand in Plath—the brazen attitude towards writing about familial issues, and the narrative lure of that—and take it to its next step. Another gift contemporary women poets have to offer teenage girl readers—frank sexuality—can be credited in part to Olds. Although Plath's poems are entrenched in the female body, and the voice is often brazen and carnal ("I eat men like air," etc.), she was writing in the 1950s and 60s, and there was so much left unsaid in the poetry of her circles. (I'd be interested to read carefully to see if things were radically different in the women of the more marginalized, non-

academic worlds of the Beats, the Black Arts Movement and the New York School and others of the time.)

But Olds came along, and now poets like Catie Rosemurgy revel in what they can say, and in ownership of both their sexuality and their candor. Rosemurgy, whose first book *My Favorite Apocalypse* was called "Plathy" in one of its back cover blurbs, has a poem called "Twelve and Listening to the Stones" (2001, 5) in which its prepubescent speaker is discovering her kegel muscles, a fact which she "might not tell" to her "best friend." The poem is linear and narrative and clear—"I can also clench/ right in front of the paperboy's face until I feel a fist/ loosening its grip on the largeness inside me"—until the very last lines of the poem, which read:

> I've worn the snow into ice.
> How quiet I can be.
> I close my eyes and change the size of things.
> My house disappears below me.
> The dark moves inside me like hands.
>
> (Rosemurgy 2001, 5)

It is this turn towards something like magical realism, towards a Plathy, mythic self, that makes the poem work, I think. The poem is sassy and dirty and tough-eyed and then wanders into mystery.

BK: Like Addonizio showing us the private girl-sleepover play that rarely gets chronicled, Rosemurgy presents a type of female sexual power that doesn't get talked about. Not because our culture's too prudish, but because what she's describing is subtle and strange and probably truly untrodden poetic subject matter.

AG: I would argue that despite our culture's blatant interest in sex, women's orgasm is still a topic we are prudish about . . . or perhaps just uninterested in, since it's not male-centered.

BK: But this poem has nothing to do with boys—besides that paperboy, who is simply the story's clueless pawn. This poem makes me

want to shout from the rooftops: "Everything has NOT already been written!" At least not for women and girls—that's what's so exciting.

Another great example of girls' untold sexual rituals appears in Danielle Pafunda's poem "Saltbox Brothel" (2005, 36). A familiar matter-of-fact, clinical (yet tongue-in-cheek) tone appears in the opening line: "I was a body. I was a laboratory. I was okay with that." Although Pafunda never explicitly describes the activity, we know it's something transgressive from phrases like "we told my mother/ we were meditating," "my dress was big and my bed even bigger," "*Be quiet*/ at regular intervals" and "Watched my own hand go down." I like Pafunda's choice to keep the ritual itself shrouded in mystery. It reminds me of Rosemurgy's speaker's pleasure at contemplating *not* telling her hypothetical best friend (and who is a poem's reader except its hypothetical best friend?) about her newfound talent. Pafunda is a more experimental poet than many of those we're discussing here, but the figurative ellipses in this poem don't feel like a postmodern stylistic tic—instead, the subject matter demands that the speaker peek out of the curtain and then duck behind it again.

AG: Pafunda and others like her are picking up on another strand in Plath, a very different one than Olds and Rosemurgy chose: that sense of mystery, of blanks left open in the poem, of prizing slipperiness and symbology over sense.

I want to note the parallel titles between Rosemurgy and Marvin, and how they both seem to call back to Plath: *World's Tallest Disaster*, *My Favorite Apocalypse*. Titles that conflate the self with the world, personal trauma with global decay, working the same way *The Bell Jar*'s opening reference to the execution of the Rosenbergs does. They are also both titles that have a smirking or jaunty nod to morbidity, as do "The Applicant" and "Daddy."

BK: Sound and rhythm are other Plath inheritances that show up in many of these poems by contemporary female poets. Marvin's internal rhyme in "Weather to Reel For" is a great example: phrases

like "Forest of feeling, bell within my body reeling" and "lift your name, caw it to fame" sing with fervor (2001, 22). Davis picks up similar sounds and rhythms in her second book, *shattered sonnets love cards and other off and back handed importunities* (2003), a volume that an Amazon.com reviewer not-so-lovingly describes as "Somewhere between a teen girl's love diary and a madwoman-in-the-attic's antics and a transcript of an autistic's mental music." Davis echoes Plath in "dis-spelt":

> My freakèd heart. With me I bring
> My prosthetic soul. Under the newly dis-astering
> Stars I dis-limn, dis-orb, dis-robe. O new disaster!
> I will need new breasts, new legs, electric shock.
> A clock, a clock. . . .
>
> (Davis 2003, 27)

Here is Plath's Applicant, Lady Lazarus-ed for the twenty-first century. (The poem later mentions "sylvia's leaves" [2003, 28].) But this is not the poem of longing that "Resolutions in a Parked Car" was: it's a break-up poem, and the speaker is the one ending the relationship. The teenage girl reader could see Plath anew through Davis, to read a different sort of drama—a woman smartly, playfully, musically (if somewhat maniacally) saying "no" to love.

AG: So contemporary poets can be "Plathy" in any number of ways: through a dark, witty, mythic approach to experiences of womanhood; through powerful and self-possessed narrative; through a nursery-rhyme-inflected attention to creepy and powerful sonics; or any combination thereof. Davis evokes all of these in turns.

Larissa Szporluk is poet who I think gets at both the mythic and sonic aspects of Plath's voice, though not the Confessionalism. In the poem "Libido" (1998, 8-9), the protagonist is sexually assaulted in the woods, "leaving her dazed by the waste// of that kind of love"

(8). In the poem's next moments, the protagonist finds not exactly comfort, but kinship, in flowers and bees—two images that frequent Plath's poems. Everything about the last three stanzas of this poem—the metaphors of flora and fauna, the careful internal rhymes and assonance, the clipped Germanic diction, the short lines and tercets, the last line at once defiant and terrifying—reminds me of an *Ariel* poem:

> [she] watches some poppies freeze
> in an orgy of plants,
> their cold red gaze grown sideways.
>
> She listens to parrots,
> true inner birds, never at rest,
> into whose breasts the world
>
> blows pleasure,
> shaking like nests full of Indian bees—
> To scream is to sing.
>
> (Szporluk 1998, 9)

BK: The title poem of Brenda Shaughnessy's first book *Interior with Sudden Joy* (1999) is written in jagged tercets, too. And like Addonizio's "Siamese," it takes on the subject matter of twinning, though in a very different way. As she seeks to give voice to the nightgown-clad twins in the Dorothea Tanning painting adorning the book cover (the original *Interior with Sudden Joy*), Shaughnessy writes a version of female identity based on the idea of the double:

> Be my other sister, we'll share a mouth.
> We'll split the dress
> down the middle, our home, our Caesarian.
>
> (Shaughnessy 1999, 79)

Like the Addonizio poem, "Interior with Sudden Joy" focuses mostly on women's relationships. But Shaughnessy writes a different sort of poem here, one that has the potential to be very appealing to young women writers. She examines how girls see themselves in each other, and how these relationships turn mythic, just as relationships do in *Ariel*. However, Shaughnessy's poems remind us of what's missing in *Ariel*—female companionship. Plath's speaker seems incapable of identifying with other women; if Shaughnessy's speaker over-identifies, there is at least a sense of communion in this.

AG: And again, the images and sound in Shaughnessy are so reminiscent of Plath: sing-songy rhymes; tight, lush images of violence; in this title poem, a threatening male figure in the form of a "Bishop" who "is a lie" (like Plath's Jailor?) (1999, 79). For example, in the middle of the poem:

> Not softly a rub with loincloth
> & linseed. More of a beating,
> with heart up the sleeve.
>
> He says, *The air in here is tight & sore*
> *but punctured, sudden, by a string quartet.*
> We are! In these light-years we've wrung a star.
> (Shaughnessy 1999, 80)

A more recent Shaughnessy poem called "I'm Over the Moon" is perhaps even more overtly Plathy:

> What do you have? You're a tool, moon.
> Now, noon. There's a hero.
> (Shaughnessy 2008, 6)

I can't hear that line without thinking of a poem like "Daddy."

BK: Neither can I. Taking the moon as her subject matter also seems like a vigorous nod to Plath. And how wonderful that she wants to revise Plath's too-powerful moon, to deflate it a bit, but does so using decidedly Plathy sarcasm, sounds, and rhythms—an homage and an update. These poems give me great hope not only for poetry for teenage girls, but for contemporary poetry in general.

AG: And this hope is one rooted in the work of Sylvia Plath, who did not let pain get in the way of making some of the most precisely piercing poems we have. We might not find great hope in her life, but in her work—in the face of all that brilliance and fire—there are the sparks that are igniting all of this poetry by the women who have come after her.

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(Sub)textual Configurations: Sexual Ambivalences in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

renée c. hoogland

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963/1980) has become one of the classic 20th-century stories of female adolescence. Feminist critics have analyzed this tale of madness and self-destruction primarily in terms of gender conflicts. From a specifically lesbian feminist perspective, this article presents a "stressed reading"[1] of *The Bell Jar*, arguing that it is not in the first place the operations of gender ideology, but rather the contradictions of female (hetero)sexuality that play a determining part. The resulting conflicts are shown to operate on the novel's narrative as well as discursive levels. The discussion centers on the two most striking features in which sexual ambivalences surface in the text: the relationship between the narrator and her protagonist and the figure of the *Doppelgänger*. Behind the mask of the female adolescent, it is argued, the configuration of a truly transgressive,[2] lesbian sex/textuality can be discerned.

(*Literary criticism; gay and lesbian studies*)

Since its publication in 1963, the reputation of Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963/1980) has acquired almost mythical proportions. The author's life and premature death have been extensively documented over the years, and the novel has become one of the classic 20th-century stories of female adolescence, enjoying somewhat of a cult status with both readers and literary critics (Alexander, 1984; Butscher, 1977; Lane, 1979; Lane & Stevens, 1978; Tabor, 1986; Wagner, 1984).[3] Taken up in the sweep of the early women's movement, Plath's alter-ego, Esther Greenwood, has served as an embodiment of female victimization in the preliberation days of the 1950s and early 1960s (Miles, 1987; Moers, 1963/1978; Pratt, 1981; Showalter, 1978). Whereas feminist critics have seen in this tale of madness and self-destruction a harrowing account of growing up fe-

male in postwar middle-class America (Martin, 1981; White, 1985), finding it one of the most powerful indictments of what is so aptly captured in Betty Friedan's phrase "the feminine mystique" (1963), *The Bell Jar* figures in mainstream literary history as the "female counterpart" to that other quintessentially American story of postwar "alienation and disengagement," J. D. Salinger's (1951) *The Catcher in the Rye* (Conn, 1990, p. 481). In fact, as Wagner-Martin (1987) pointed out, Plath used the latter novel as a model, turning to it for structure, and drawing on it "whenever she ran out of events that seemed to fit Esther's story" (p. 187). Although such comments should warn us against reading *The Bell Jar* as a direct reflection of the author's life, Plath's various biographers (see note 3) and her posthumously published letters (1975) and journals (1983) confirm that *The Bell Jar* is largely autobiographical in content. The author's suicide a few months after the book came out undeniably enhanced the novel's sensational impact, which does not seem to have diminished within the now almost 30 years of its history. What could be the incentive for attempting to reread a text so well-known that it seems to have become almost common property? What I present in this article is a "stressed reading" of *The Bell Jar*, which approaches it as a novel of female adolescence in which it is not in the first place the operations of gender ideology but rather the conflicts of female (hetero)sexuality that play a determining part. Although my main focus is on certain complexities offered by/and in the text, I also consider those contextual factors that are, I think, crucial to such a "different" understanding of the novel.

The impressive reputation of *The Bell Jar* may easily lead us to forget that, although Plath wrote to friends that she "enjoyed writing the book," indeed claimed that she "had never been so excited about anything else she had written," she later called *The Bell Jar* a "potboiler" and published it under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas (Wagner-Martin, 1987, pp. 186, 189). Anne Stevenson (1989) noted that Plath insisted that she did not wish to link her name as a poet to such a "potboiler." Obviously not quite satisfied with this explanation, Stevenson

then attributed Plath's reluctance to publish the novel under her own name to a need for "discretion" in view of the "barely disguised, hurtful portrait of her mother" and the "portrayal . . . of a devastating period in her own personal history" it presents (p. 285). But these presumed grounds for the option of anonymity also appear inadequate, for Stevenson added in a footnote that "toward the end of her life [Plath] abandoned this discretion and spoke of the novel to several London friends" (p. 227). Wagner-Martin (1987), in contrast, asserted that writing the novel was a "liberating experience" for Plath and further suggested that her alter ego "Esther is not ashamed of her descent into madness; she wants to tell about it, partly to rid herself of memories, partly to help other women faced with the same cultural pressure" that precipitated her mental breakdown (p. 186). In trying to account for the Plath's "discretion," she points to the "ambivalent" portrayal of all the older female characters in *The Bell Jar*, identifying them in their function as unreliable teachers or dubious role models (p. 189). Despite the fact that the intertextual paradigm of the "young girl/older woman" or the "pupil/teacher-relationship" forms one of the central topoi in the fragmented tradition of lesbian literature,[4] Wagner-Martin did not see any need to probe into the underlying causes or the specific quality of this "ambivalence." Nor did she appear to perceive that a similar kind of ambiguity suffuses the protagonist's strained relationships with the female characters of her own age. One of the questions I explore here is the possible connection between Plath's initial wariness of linking her name to the product of a presumably "liberating" experience and the precise nature of the "ambivalence" characterizing the relations between the protagonist/narrator and the adolescent female characters surrounding her.

The Bell Jar's present-day status may perhaps also obscure the fact that the manuscript was accepted by its original British publisher only after several American editors had rejected it. Whereas Plath's use of a pseudonym may have been a deliberate act to disengage herself from this "transposed autobiography,"[5] the novel was also subjected

to a further (and in this case externally imposed) divorce from its author by appearing not in her native country but in one in which she was at the time cast in the role of "resident alien." This atmosphere of disconnection and estrangement marking the novel's history from the beginning in fact acquires, I believe, distinct significance in retrospect. Of interest is that the two female American editors who refused the manuscript did so—"kindly but with apt criticism" as Stevenson approvingly remarked—because Esther Greenwood's "experience remain[ed] a private one" (Stevenson, 1989, p. 285). Clearly, any awareness of "the feminine mystique," or of what would later be covered by the feminist slogan "the personal is political," had not yet entered New York editorial offices. Eventually, the book was launched by Heinemann on January 14. Although none of the reviews that subsequently appeared in the British press were "entirely adverse," most critics' responses showed remarkable agreement in at least one respect: All felt that the author had not succeeded in "establishing a viewpoint" (Macpherson, 1991; Stevenson, 1989; Wagner-Martin, 1987). This same "problem" of perspective, I suggest, is closely entwined with the ambivalence marking the female interrelationships in the novel and, in addition, allows us to perceive its connections with the resulting sexual conflicts and contradictions operating on the novel's narrative as well as discursive levels. Because I cannot do justice to the complexities of *The Bell Jar* as a whole, I narrow my discussion to the two most striking and, I think, most significant aspects in and through which such sexual, as distinct from *gender* conflicts surface in the text. First, I momentarily dwell on the relationship between the narrator and her protagonist—or to use Genette's (1986) somewhat opaque but more precise terms, between the extra-diegetic and the diegetic levels of the text.[6] Second, I focus on the figure of the *Doppelgänger* or double.

* * *

Because my attempt at producing a "stressed reading" of *The Bell Jar* forms part of a more extended inquiry into lesbian sex/textualities in English novels of female development of the 1960s, I first briefly outline a number of its underlying theoretical assumptions in order to clarify my reasons for including the novel within this larger project.[7]

In exploring deviant sex/textualities in the context of female adolescent writing, I am not primarily concerned with the representation or portrayal of lesbian characters, or with resolving the question of what makes a text a "lesbian text." Nor, I should add, is it my objective (posthumously) to establish the "truth" about certain authors' sexual orientations. Instead, I focus on textual figures and figurations, on what Roof (1991) called "configurations of lesbian sexuality" (p. 5). One of the reasons for taking such an angle is the problematical question of definition that has beset lesbian critical theory and practice from its earliest stages (Palmer, 1990; Zimmerman, 1985, 1990). In her essay "To Be and Be Seen," feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye (1983) described a still highly relevant struggle in trying to define the term *lesbian*. Taking her readers on a "guided tour of a few standard dictionaries," Frye arrived at the logical impossibility of giving semantic substance to a term that serves to denote that which cannot be "countenanced" by the "conceptual scheme" of the patriarchal order (p. 154). Finding herself engaged "in a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness—dancing about a region of cognitive gaps and negative semantic spaces" (p. 154), she inferred that the "metaphysical overkill" characterizing the ways in which lesbians are "*excluded* from the scheme" of phallogocentrism signals a "manipulation, a scurrying to erase, to divert the attention, the mind, the eye" (p. 162). Within the system of Western metaphysics, the concept of lesbianism turns out to be "*naturally* impossible as well as *logically* impossible" and, on top of this, "internally self-contradictory" (p. 159). The "overdetermination" of the mechanisms of erasure operative with respect to lesbian sexuality testifies to the threat it poses to the symbolic order, for the lesbian is, "by virtue of her focus, her attention," not committed to the "mainte-

nance" of one of the mainstays of this order, the system of gendered power relations. In fact, Frye concluded, the lesbian's "mode of disloyalty threatens [the] utter dissolution" of the "play" entitled "Phallocratic Reality." Admitting that such a claim sounds "extreme, of course, perhaps even hysterical," Frye explained the otherwise inexplicable circumstance that the lesbian is suspected of having the power to "dissolve the social order as we know it"—that is, insofar as the "rhetoric of the fanatic fringe of the phallocratic loyalists" is anything to go by—by proposing that becoming a lesbian means a "reorientation of attention in a kind of ontological conversion" (p. 171). Such an analysis implies that lesbian sexuality, precisely because of its fundamental "disloyalty" to a hierarchical system of (hetero)sexual gender relations, represents the vanishing point of Western metaphysics, constituting the moment at which the fundamental contradictions of the "hom(m)osexual" symbolic order—to borrow Irigaray's (1977/1985) provocative term (p. 171)—reveal themselves.[8] Female same-sex relationships, by effectively calling into question any prevailing notions of a "natural" heterosexuality, at the same time critically expose the profoundly precarious basis of the concepts of masculinity and femininity per se, grounded as these are in a system of power relations organized around a binary and oppositional notion of sexual difference.

In a more recent and sustained effort at disentangling the paradoxical (non)existence of lesbian sexuality, Roof (1991) pursued a corresponding line of argument. Drawing on a diversity of discourses, from cinema and psychoanalysis to literature and literary criticism, and investigating their intertextual connections, Roof succeeded in delineating a range of "similar rhetorical or argumentative positions" vis-à-vis lesbian sexuality in both male- and female-authored texts. Almost literally echoing Frye, Roof posited: "Operating as points of systemic failure, configurations of lesbian sexuality often reflect the complex incongruities that occur when the logic or philosophy of a system becomes self-contradictory, visibly fails to account for something, or

cannot complete itself" (p. 5). Roof equally stressed the overdetermined nature of such configurations by professing that lesbian sexuality "simultaneously . . . instigates the overtly compensatory and highly visible return of the terms of the ruptured system that mend and mask its gaps" (p. 5). The threat of exposure embodied by the lesbian hence entails that "attempts to depict or explain lesbian sexuality spur anxieties about knowledge and identity" (p. 5). As a result, such usually oblique and ambiguous configurations function as "complex representations whose particular location in a text . . . reveal not lesbian sexuality per se, but the anxieties it produces" (p. 5).

What I am interested in, therefore, are the various discursive figures under whose guise lesbian sexuality tends to surface in Western European and American literature, in textual configurations that operate as covert articulations of the "love that dare not speak its name." What is "unnameable" surfaces in the contradictory "nodal points" structuring a given text, discursive "knots" that acquire the significance of, to quote Roof (1991) again, "conflicting impetuses of representational insufficiency and recuperation" (p. 5). To her list of such configurations—which includes "titillating foreplay, simulated heterosexuality, exotic excess, knowing center, joking inauthenticity, artful compromise, and masculine masks"—I add the figure of the female adolescent (p. 4).[9] Functioning in the Western cultural imagination as an emblem of indefiniteness and ambiguity, the adolescent character in literary texts, I argue, may operate as a mask of an unstable and transgressive (or lesbian) sex/textuality.

* * *

The concept of adolescence as a stage of development with explicitly sexual connotations is of relatively recent date (Dalsimer, 1986; hoogland, in press; Pattynama, 1992). Whereas the Romantic Age can be considered to have given birth to the category of the child (think of Rousseau's *Émile*), it was the work of the sexologists at the end of the

19th century (Ellis, 1897/1911; Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1965) and the dissemination of (Freudian) psychoanalytic theory at the beginning of the 20th century that produced the notion of adolescence as we know it (Chauncey, 1983; Faderman, 1991). In Foucauldian terms, it was thus with the "invention of sexuality" as such (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 117), that the adolescent entered our discursive universe. Conceived as an essentially transitional phenomenon, adolescence subsequently became recognized as a crucial stage in identity formation precisely because of its sexual overdetermination, as an intermediate period during which the relatively unsexed child develops into a sexually fully differentiated adult subject. Encompassing an inevitable but passing psychosexual crisis (Erikson, 1968), the task of adolescence is successfully completed with the individual's "espousal" and internalization of either of two culturally acceptable forms of adult subjecthood, that is, when he or she adopts on a subjective, psychic level what are in effect culturally constructed images of masculinity and femininity respectively. Whereas the locus of 20th-century definitions of identity thus in the first instance appears to reside in a person's sexuality, the institutionalization of 19th-century medico-scientific discourses has paradoxically succeeded in shifting attention away from sex to gender. In line with prevalent biological and psychological notions regarding puberty, adolescence is today generally understood to be a period of mental/emotional confusion, of (sexual) experimentation, of irresponsibility; indeed, as a stage of licensed rebellion ultimately aimed at setting individuals on their way to their future roles in the social order. By positing a direct and causal relationship between the biological body, psychosexuality, and gender, the discourse of adolescence has thus itself become another of what Foucault (1976/1990) called "technologies" (p. 108) of sexuality, ushering children of either sex into their adult positions as gendered subjects.

In traditional literary terms, it is the genre of the *Bildungsroman* that centers on this critical phase of subjective formation.[10] Depicting the hero/ine's quest for her/his Self, such narrative itineraries are usually

characterized by a strong sense of dislocation. Organized around a protagonist overwhelmed by feelings of meaninglessness and incoherence, adolescent novels present often disconcerting accounts of disorder on which an omniscient narrator, firmly established in the position of an adult subject, retrospectively imposes order. From its opening sentence onward, *The Bell Jar* (1963/1980) conforms to this pattern: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (p. 1). Situating the narrative in a specific moment in the past, the sense of disconnection expressed in the latter part of this sentence acquires a gruesome dimension by the preceding reference to the Rosenbergs. Invoking an atmosphere of betrayal, death, and destruction, the narrator forges an unequivocal link between her former Self and the sociopolitical context: "It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (p. 1). Having observed that "something was wrong with" her at the time, she proceeds by emphatically establishing a distance between this 19-year-old girl—feeling "still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel" (p. 3)—and herself, shifting to a later moment at which she "was all right again," and on to the narrative present. We learn that this later Self still keeps material objects from the past "around the house" and only "last week" brought them out again "for the baby to play with" (p. 4). By demarcating her present Self in precisely these terms, the narrator asserts that she is now fulfilling her proper role as a wife and mother. The text thus foregrounds that her alter-ego's "recovery" is located first and foremost in the acquisition of a "normal" sex/gender identity.

Although a deliberate distancing between the narrator and the protagonist is a feature characterizing most novels of development, the clash between the disturbing narrative events of *The Bell Jar*, between Esther Greenwood's story of madness and despair, and the jauntily sarcastic, even cynical tone of voice in which it is rendered, is quite extreme. The novel's high degree of artistic control appears to point up

the narrator's need to set up a complex defense system, her show of discursive authority serving to contain the threat of disintegration posed by the inscription of insanity. The tension resulting from the interplay between these two textual levels has, I think, correctly been analyzed by feminist critics as a reflection of the contradictory demands made upon women by patriarchal ideology.[11] However, their focus on gender tends to obscure the problematical assumption underlying such critiques, namely, the unquestioningly presupposed existence of two distinct groups of sexed subjects. Hence, most feminist readings of *The Bell Jar*, by privileging the category of gender have (perhaps unwittingly) succeeded in shifting attention away from the powerful sexual subtext underpinning the narrative, a subtext that, as I have suggested, structurally informs the novel's dual discursive surface. Although I do not wish to imply that gender is not relevant to Esther Greenwood's predicament, I do think that too little critical attention has been paid to her story's sexual undercurrents.

Because psychoanalysts agree that sexuality largely obtains on the level of the unconscious, a psychoanalytic perspective would appear to offer the most viable approach to the relation between the author-narrator of the adolescent novel and her subject matter, at least in the context of my proposed stressed reading. In psychic terms, adolescence is induced by the reemerging oedipal depression at the end of the latency period. It entails a reawakening of the repressed desire for the primary love-object, which—in Western cultures based on the nuclear family—is the mother for subjects of either sex. Prompted by the onset of puberty, the adolescent quest is aimed at the recovery of a second love object. As Kristeva (1990) pointed out, this psychosexual crisis involves a resurgence of repressed presymbolic or imaginary material "in the aftermath of the oedipal stabilization of subjective identity." This leads the adolescent to a renewed questioning of his or her identifications "along with his [sic] capacities for speech and symbolization" (p. 9). As an "open structure" personality, the adolescent, Kristeva submitted, "maintains a renewable identity" (p. 8), having access to imagi-

nary material that in Western culture is granted to the adult "only as a reader or spectator . . . or as artist" (p. 11). The activity of writing adolescence can therefore "permit a genuine inscription of unconscious contents within language" (p. 9), and the act of fictionalizing serves as a "powerful screen against madness" (p. 17). The adolescent novel enables the writing subject to "re-elaborate his/[her] psychic space" while the authorial narrator, with his or her unrestrained power over characters, action, and plot simultaneously functions as a forceful ordering principle to protect him or her "from phobic affects" (p. 10). The open structure of the novel thus serves to accommodate the reemergence of repressed unconscious contents as well enabling its symbolic recollection in a process of psychic reorganization.

Singling out the adolescent as a "*topos* of incompleteness that is also that of all possibilities," the somewhat celebratory vein in which Kristeva (1990, p. 14) described the polyvalence of adolescent writing surely partly derives from her unwavering bias for male-authored texts. By not considering any female adolescent novels, she was able to gloss conveniently over the fundamental contradictions marking female sexuality from its earliest stages onward. After all, within the context of normative heterosexuality, the oedipal crisis for the little girl involves not only the abandonment of her desire for the first love object and its redirection to an object of the opposite sex, but also the enforced identification with the position of inferiority of the now-devalued mother. Taken together, the loss of the original object and the girl's recognition of her constitution in lack, acquire—to borrow a phrase of Silverman's (1988)—the significance of "major surgery" (p. 122). Surely a reemergence of this highly traumatic experience cannot but painfully inculcate upon the female subject the founding split in her Self, the split caused by the irreconcilability of her need for symbolic agency on the one hand, and her desire for the primary object on the other. Because a same-sex female object choice falls virtually outside the patriarchal symbolic, it would appear that it is these oppositional desires that significantly qualify the writing of *female* ad-

olescence. And, I propose, it is this split that by extension accounts for the friction between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic discursive levels in such narratives. The strained intensity marking the discourse of *The Bell Jar* can thus be seen to signal precisely the kind of "systemic failure" that, as Roof (1991) suggested, allows us to locate "configurations of lesbian sexuality" (p. 2). For as the metaphor of "speaking in tongues" (frequently used in relation to lesbian writing) indicates, the irreconcilability of these desires discloses itself on the level of discourse. Realized in a splitting off of markedly discrepant voices, the psychic effects of such discursive fragmentation are rather more serious than what we nowadays assume to be conveyed by the self-conscious multi-voicedness or "carnivalesque heteroglossia" characteristic of postmodern texts.[12] This immediately becomes apparent when, at an early point in *The Bell Jar*, the narrator, finding herself being addressed by two different names in two different voices, ostensibly jokingly remarks that it is "as if [she] had a split personality or something" (p. 22).

The concept of the split personality directs us to the second of the discursive knots I set out to examine. Before doing so, however, I should emphasize that, while literary texts of course never directly reflect the social reality in which they were produced, it is crucial to take into account the significance of the intertextual relations between a novel and its cultural context. As sites of struggle over meaning, literary texts can, as Barrett (1985) argued, legitimately be read so as to provide an "indication of the bounds within which particular meanings are constructed and negotiated in a given social formation" (p. 85). The appearance of the term *split personality* therefore requires some preliminary comments. As one among a number of psychoanalytic concepts now belonging to our everyday vocabulary, such terms were introduced to the public mind only when postwar mass culture facilitated the popular dissemination of Freudian ideas, when, in effect, psychoanalysis became a lay discourse. What is more, it was the vulgarized version of Freud's work that in the reactionary 1950s became the re-

pressive tool of social control, resulting in the kinds of "normalizing cure" that have given American psychoanalytic practice such a bad name. In a postmodern age celebrating "difference," we would be likely to gloss over the profound anxiety that lies behind Esther Greenwood's deceptively humorous remark on her personality. Perhaps even more importantly, we might equally—in our present post-Berlin-wall era—underestimate the incisive effects on people's personal lives of the repressive Cold War climate that forms the wider sociohistorical context of *The Bell Jar.* As Macpherson (1991) pointed out in her illuminating discussion of the novel's political context, "by the mid-1950s 'the norm,' a single-dimensional conformity based on image, seemed to have achieved the status of official language . . . those speaking a different language were by definition Alien" (p. 1). Exposed to the "communist threat," Americans were subjected to what was, in the final instance, a system of virtually national surveillance. The immense impact of the public tribunals resulted from the fact that the "secret surveillance of citizenry and public exposure" had entered ordinary citizens' homes, having been engineered and channeled "through the mass media" (p. 2). Not very surprisingly, Joseph McCarthy's America saw, as King (1992) submitted, a thorough "intertwining" of the "spectres of homosexuality and communism" (p. 52). The sway of the "Red scare" therefore rendered even the suspicion of disloyalty to the law, including deviation from the sexual norm, into a potentially criminal act. Rhetorically dividing the world into Us and Them, the system of public persecution secured social conformity by disseminating a nationwide scare of "the enemy within."[13]

It is this paranoid notion of the enemy within that establishes the link between Esther Greenwood and the Rosenbergs. It also, by extension, marks the connection between her "split personality" and the figure of the lesbian in its historical function as the absent/repressed psychosexual Other to Western culture (Benstock, 1991). As Macpherson (1991) made clear, the repressive power politics effected by a "mass communication system unprecedented in history" proved to be

the most pervasive "Ideological State Apparatus" to date (p. 3).[14] "Interpellated" into positions in which mental health equalled social adjustment, "each citizen was set self-policing to enact a 'fulfilled' conformity convincing to others if always fraudulent to oneself" (Macpherson, 1991, p. 3). The paranoia proceeding from "this basic psychic dishonesty" would urge individuals on to seek "only external screens on which to project the denied self and call it the Other" (p. 3). Set against a background in which ideological "scapegoating" was a policy practiced on a national scale, Plath's frequently noted preoccupation with "doubles" hence acquires particular significance.

In psychoanalytic terms, the setting up of (imaginary) *Doppelgängers* or doubles serves to screen the subject against unwanted or anxiety-ridden aspects of herself, by displacing them onto (an) external Other(s). In literary texts, as Rogers (1970) explained, the figure of the double generally represents a character "which may be thought of . . . as directly portraying, or indirectly generated by, conflict which is intrapsychic or endopsychic" (p. 4). Such doubling may take multiple forms, different aspects of the Self being transformed into a number of different characters representing a variety of "conflicting drives, orientations, or attitudes" (p. 5). That such splittings are not restricted to the inner psyche, or rather, that psychic formations are structurally informed if not constituted by/in ideological operations, becomes apparent in Rogers's remark on the frequent "inclination of the racist" to "adopt social myths as a mode of dealing with his own inner tension and insecurity" (p. 13). Drawing an analogy between the "phenomenon of decomposition in literature" and the neurotic's strategy of psychic dissociation, he still maintained that "decomposition remains a minor concept in psychoanalytic theory" because "cases of autoscopic vision and multiple personality" (the "principal counterparts" of decomposition in clinical practice) had as yet "not been encountered" by practicing psychoanalysts (p. 13). The spate of medico-scientific publications on multiple personality disorder that have flooded the market in recent years would appear to signify a dramatic cultural change in

this respect (Cohen, Giller, & Lynn, 1991; Putnam, 1989).[15] The relative prevalence of this disorder in patients having suffered from sexual abuse and/or incest indicates that as a complex psychic defense system, the syndrome entails extreme measures of self-repression and/or potential self-mutilation. In this light, Rogers's description of the double as the outcome of an "inner, emotional split, an ambivalence generated out of his own confusion about his identity" seems distinctly prosaic (p. 6). Such an appreciation of the *Doppelgänger* comes, after all, very close to what Erikson (1968) defined as the "normal" crisis structure of adolescence (p. 128). However, the often sexual underpinnings of psychic dissociation and the connection made by Rogers between the "narcissistic phenomenon" of doubling and paranoia—existing in the "mechanism of projection . . . common to both"—supports my belief that it is in the multiple figurations of the adolescent that the inscription of insanity in the text of *The Bell Jar* and its subtext of sexual conflict converge.

Although Esther Greenwood at some point consciously assumes the fictive identity of "Elly Higginbottom . . . from Chicago" to feel "safer" in the unwonted cosmopolitan world of New York where she is spending a summer as guest editor of a fashion magazine called *Ladies' Day*, three major doubles appear that represent the kind of genuine psychic split-offs of the (unconscious) Self that are manifest in multiple personalities. The first to appear is Doreen, a luscious Southern belle who, the narrator "guess[es]," was "one of [her] troubles" (Plath, 1963/1980, p. 4). Described in unmistakably erotic terms, Doreen functions as both the object of Esther's aggressive sexual desire—"[She] had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them" (p. 6)—and as an object of her identificatory investment—"Everything [Doreen] said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my bones" (p. 7). The implied contradiction becomes quite explicit when Doreen, with her "bright, white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes

like transparent agate marbles" (pp. 4-5), is envisaged as the positive image of femininity in relation to which the narrator differentiates her former Self as its negative counterpart: "With her white hair and white dress [Doreen] was so white she looked silver . . . I felt myself melting into the shadows like a negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (p. 10). Although her double's unrestrained sensuality and sexual escapades alternately make Esther feel like a "small black dot" and a "hole in the ground" (p. 17), such putative promiscuity also fills her with a profound sense of guilt and disgust. In order to dissociate herself from "Doreen's body," perceived as the "concrete testimony of [her) own dirty nature," she frequently purges herself by taking hot baths: "I guess I feel about a hot bath the way . . . religious people feel about holy water" (p. 21). Producing a complex mixture of feelings, from an acute sense of inadequacy to physical attraction as well as repulsion, Doreen represents for Esther the stereotypical image of Woman as flesh, functioning as one of the stock figures of normative femininity at once imposed and forbidden by the Paternal Law.

Set off as a foil to this "bad girl" is another of Esther's doubles, "good girl" Betsy, who seems "imported straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi-smile" (Plath, 1963/1980, p. 6). Betsy is the incarnation of innocence, of clean and healthy virginity (the narrator wryly observes that "pureness was the great issue" when she was 19), and Esther treasures this Other as her most inner Self: "Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy. . . . It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (p. 24). As flip sides of the coin stamped "patriarchal womanhood," these two figures symbolize the incompatible demands imposed on female subjects by dominant gender ideologies, resulting in the contradictions so aptly conveyed by Esther Greenwood's name.[16]

Introduced at an early point in the text, Esther's third double, Joan Gilling, gradually gains significance. She begins to figure prominently only when the protagonist's increasing mental disorder has resulted in her commitment to a psychiatric hospital after a nearly successful sui-

cide attempt. Esther's apparent schizophrenia is thus from the first tightly linked with this figure, who is consistently presented in terms that invoke the stereotypical image of the "mannish lesbian" (Newton, 1984): "Big as a horse" and a former "college hockey champion," Joan Gilling is said to have "teeth like tombstones," a "breathy voice," and to be keen on "doing things out-of-doors" (Plath, 1963/1980, p. 61). In further sharp contrast to her two "feminine" doubles, Joan, with her "pale, pebble eyes," is initially suggested to identify with Esther rather than the other way around. She suddenly shows up in the hospital, claiming to have cut her wrists after reading about Esther in the newspapers, therewith suggesting to the latter that they "might have something in common" (p. 212). Identified as the "beaming double of [her] old best self," Joan breaks the spell of passivity in which Esther has been caught up since her hospitalization. Her subjection to the psychiatric "discipline of normalization" (treatment consists of large doses of insulin and electroshock therapy) has effectively broken the protagonist's spirit. Awakening her from the stupor brought about by this medical regime, Joan enables Esther's intellectual and artistic aspirations to reemerge. But with the resurrection of these "masculine" ambitions, the old fear of inadequacy also returns, leading Esther to suspect that this "old best self" is something "specially designed to follow and torment" her (p. 217).

Alternately taking up a position as object and as subject in the ensuing desirous and identificatory interchange between herself and her double, Esther's feelings toward Joan remain utterly ambivalent. The precise nature of this ambivalence is, although the "unnameable" word is never actually mentioned, disclosed by various references to lesbian sexuality generally, and in connection with Joan in particular, which surface with growing frequency in the latter half of the text. Indeed, the narrator's penchant for blunt statements and direct description apparently falters on this "negative semantic space." When Joan tells Esther about her close relations with one of the older women haunting the latter's imagination (i.e., the mother of her former boyfriend, Buddy Wil-

lard), the gap in the narrator's discourse is typographically rendered in a series of full stops: "Joan and Mrs Willard. Joan . . . and Mrs. Willard . . ." (Plath, 1963/1980, p. 230). The suggestive value of these dots is indirectly revealed when, without further transition, the narrator continues to relate an event having occurred earlier that day. Getting no answer to her knocking on another patient's door, she had "stepped into [DeeDee's] room," fully realizing the transgressive nature of her act:

> At Belsize, even at Belsize, the doors had locks, but the patients had no keys. A shut door meant privacy, and was respected, like a locked door. One knocked and knocked again, then went away. I remembered this as I stood, my eyes half-useless after the brilliance of the hall, in the room's deep, musky dark. (p. 230)

Urged on by her wish to know, to solve the riddle of what "women and women . . . would be actually doing," hoping for what she elsewhere specifies as "some revelation of specific evil," Esther is faced with what she desires to see but cannot consciously register nor depict in any other but covert terms:

> As my vision cleared, I saw a shape rise from the bed. . . . The shape adjusted its hair, and two pale, pebble eyes regarded me through the gloom. DeeDee lay back on the pillows, bare-legged under her green wool dressing-gown, and watched me with a little mocking smile. (pp. 230-231)

After this incident, Joan's function as Other becomes even more pronounced. Even looking at her gives Esther a "creepy feeling" as if she were "observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad." In fact, the closer she comes to an acknowledgment of her "fascination" with Joan, the stronger Esther's need to distance herself from the Other's "thoughts and feelings," which she defines as "a wry black image of [her] own" (p. 231). While evoking the connotations of negativity and

inversion surrounding the lesbian in the cultural imagination, the striking resemblance between this image of blackness and the view of her former self as the "negative" of the white, bright embodiment of heterosexuality, Doreen, becomes all the more suggestive when the narrator subsequently admits: "Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would pop in at every crisis of my life" (p. 231). Indicating that it is her double's inverted sexuality that poses the most fundamental threat to her frenzied attempts at practicing her "new, normal personality" (p. 238), it is no longer very surprising that, with Esther's increasingly successful "normalization," Joan's mental health deteriorates. In the end, the negative Other is quite literally killed off: in the penultimate chapter we learn that Joan has "hanged herself" (p. 248).[17]

This act of erasure forms the culmination in a string of similar displacements, a sequence of narrative and discursive dissociations that may have found its starting point in *The Bell Jar*'s extratextual or pretextual history. But as her survival as a character suggests, the negative Other's disappearance from Esther's story may not be as definitive an obliteration as it would seem. Indeed, the specter of the invert continues to haunt the text, for the ambivalence surrounding this *Doppelgänger* is sustained also on the diegetic level. The narrator's unabated struggle with "the enemy within" is unmistakably articulated in the passage depicting the scene of Joan's funeral:

> At the altar the coffin loomed in its snow-pallor of flowers—the black shadow of something that wasn't there. . . . That shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in the whiteness, and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave. . . . All during the simple funeral service I wondered what I was burying. (Plath, 1963/1980, p. 256)

In the light of my stressed reading of the text, the black and white imagery controlling this passage would in itself seem adequately to sup-

port my contention that a conflictual sexuality lies "buried" beneath *The Bell Jar*'s "normalized" surface structure. However, the narrator's retrospective self-questioning conclusively accounts for the profound anxiety that, articulated in the text's disparate discursive operations, was also recognized by Plath's American publishers when they rejected the manuscript due to the author's failure to "establish a viewpoint." Placed within its sociopolitical context, I think we can legitimately assume that *The Bell Jar* was unacceptable not only because it called into question the myth of all-American womanhood but also, and perhaps primarily, because its subtext of sexual splitting threatened to expose the "wound in the whiteness" of normative female heterosexuality itself. Behind the mask of the female adolescent, we can thus discern the configuration of a truly transgressive, lesbian sex/textuality.

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Notes

1. *Stressed reading:* This phrase conveys that I restrict my focus to aspects of the text that appear particularly relevant to my purpose here. All readings of any text are, of course, necessarily partial and subjective. In traditional critical practice, the highlighting of some textual aspects to the disregard of others tends to go unnoticed (and therewith the interests underlying the processes of selection) as long as critics comply with standardized conventions. Feminist and other poststructuralist critics aim at making such, often unconscious, investments visible by explicitizing their critical and theoretical frameworks.

2. *Transgressive:* Moving beyond or breaking the boundaries of generally accepted and acceptable ideas about what is "normal" or "natural." In a predominantly heterosexual culture, other modes of sexuality can only be defined as "abnormal" or "unnatural."

3. "The Story of Sylvia Plath" clearly continues to vex as much as to fascinate her various biographers' imaginations. Whereas her life has been the subject of two recent major biographies written by women, it is the author's death that—significantly—forms the focus of Hayman (1991). This shift in emphasis from life to death gives new

impetus to the question of the gendered distribution of importance given, within our culture, to the beginnings and endings of stories. On the oedipal nature of desire in narrative, see de Lauretis (1984). Wagner-Martin (1987) presented an appreciative though somewhat conventional account of Plath's life, but her reading of *The Bell Jar* seems more informed by wishful thinking than by a critical attention to the contradictions in the text. Stevenson's (1989) book is slightly disturbing, because the biographer apparently had little or no sympathy for the character she tried to reconstruct. The "bitterness" of the book's title suggests more about Stevenson's relationship to her subject than about that subject itself.

4. In her seminal essay on lesbian models and paradigms in the texts of Western culture, Elaine Marks (1979) traced the development of this so-called Sappho model from its origins in Greek myth to its contemporary survival in lesbian utopian fiction.

5. The phrase *transposed autobiography* derives from the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973), who used it first in a very restricted sense only and eventually expanded the notion to encompass fiction in general (Bowen, 1962, p. 78). For a further discussion of the problematical relations between fiction and reality, see hoogland (1993).

6. Wallace Martin (1986) explained these terms under two different headings. He described *diegesis* as an "element of narration," comparable to "summary" or "telling," and applicable when a "narrator describes what happened in his/her own words (or recounts what characters think and feel, without quotation)" (p. 124). In this scheme the "extra-diegetic" level falls under the category of "authorial narration," indicating whether a narrator is inside or outside the story he or she narrates (p. 135). Rimmon-Kenan (1983/1986) defined the term *diegesis* as the narrative "events themselves," and the "extra-diegetic" level refers to the "highest level" within the hierarchy of narratives within narratives characteristic of novelistic discourse—that is, the one "immediately superior to the first narrative and concerned with its narration" (p. 91). I use the terms in the latter's sense. Sniader-Lanser (1981) used the term *extra-fictional voice* to designate the authorial instance, which, although "absent" from the narrative text, is always present as the "most direct counterpart for the historical author" (p. 123).

7. This book-in-progress will eventually include readings of Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* (1951), Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love* (1955), May Sarton's *The Small Room* (1961), Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), Jennifer Dawson's *The Ha-Ha* (1961), and Mary McCarthy's *The* Group (1963).

8. As de Lauretis (1988) explained, with this term Irigaray "puns on the French word for man, *homme*, from the Latin *homo* (meaning 'man'), and the Greek *homo* (meaning 'same')" (p. 156).

9. On the significance and function of masks and signals as textual strategies in (male) homosex/textualities, see Keilson-Lauritz (1991); on lesbian masks in Dutch literature of the 1950s, see Pattynama (1991).

10. On the ways in which this initially 18th-century and predominantly male genre was, at the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, transformed into the specifically female genre of the novel of awakening, see Abel, Hirsch, and Langland (1983). For an extensive study of female adolescence in contemporary narrative texts, see Pattynama (1992).

11. As Plath's various biographers contend, and her own *Journals* confirm, the author-poet was herself quite literally split apart by the double standard informing the myth of femininity prevailing in her lifetime.

12. For a general introduction to postmodernism, see, for instance, Hutcheon (1988); for an appreciation of the phenomenon in the context of lesbian writing, see Munt (1992). With the terms of *heteroglossia* and *carnival*, I am loosely referring to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. For a comprehensive introduction to his work and thought, see Clark and Holquist (1984).

13. J. Edgar Hoover's term for American Communists (Macpherson, 1991, p. 30).

14. On the different functions and effects of "Repressive State Apparatuses," such as the police and the legal system, and "Ideological State Apparatuses," such as the educational system, the family, the church, and the mass media, see Althusser (1970/1984).

15. The recently released Dutch documentary film *De Ontkenning* (*Denial*) (1992) offered a careful and authentic portrait of a young woman suffering from multiple personality disorder, shedding a disturbing light on the ramifications and backgrounds of the disorder. It may not be entirely coincidental that it is only now, when the cultural crisis occasioned by postmodernism has fully entered the domain of general debate, that the so-called decentered subject has been acknowledged in its clinical guise.

16. In the Old Testament, Esther was a beautiful Jewess who became queen of Persia and saved her people from a massacre. The protagonist's Christian name hence suggests strong (Jewish) womanhood, reinforcing the identification with Ethel Rosenberg but also contrasting sharply with her family name, Greenwood, which simultaneously signifies "immaturity" and "confusion" (as in being "in the woods" about a problem or question).

17. Wagner-Martin's (1987) comment on the passage provides a perfect example of the strategies of erasure commonly practiced on configurations of lesbian sexuality. Although she may well be correct in maintaining that "for Esther . . . the suspicion of her friend's sexual preference is much less important than the fact of her death," she nonetheless succeeds in diverting attention away from the fact that it is precisely because of her "sexual preference" that Joan's death acquires such crucial importance for Esther. See Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 187.

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"The Woman Is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment": Sylvia Plath and *Mademoiselle* Magazine

Garry M. Leonard

> Plane curves are for the math books. For *captivating* curves, try Hidden Treasure—the only bra designed to add perfection to the A-minus, B-minus, or C-minus cup. Instantly transforms a blue belle into a "dish fit for the gods!" (Shakespeare said it!)
>
> (*Mademoiselle*, August 1953, 191)

> As commodities, women are . . . two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value.
>
> (Irigaray 175)

> I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was . . . how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue.
>
> (Plath, *Bell Jar* 2-3)

In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia Plath makes a strong case that throwaway items such as cosmetic accessories may exert more of an influence upon women than things that pose as permanent, such as beliefs and self-worth. The enduring values that Esther Greenwood is supposed to absorb during her guest editorship at *Ladies' Day* magazine—hard work, healthy grooming, virginity until marriage—strike her as shallow and hypocritical. And yet despite her cynical disgust at what she sees at *Ladies' Day*, she is astonishingly devoted to the supposedly disposable cosmetic kit that she acquires there:

> I still have the make-up kit they gave me, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair: an oblong of brown mascara with a tiny brush, and a round basin of blue eye-shadow just big enough to dab the tip of your finger in, and three lipsticks ranging from red to pink, all cased in the same little gilt box with a mirror on one side. I also have a white plastic sunglasses case with colored shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed onto it.
>
> I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with. (2-3)

These plastic giveaways play a central role in Esther's life; her loving description of the cosmetic kit is completely at odds with her growing disgust for the fashion and magazine industries. On one level she understands that the beauty industry, through advertisements and giveaways, pretends to care for her development as a person when in fact its sole concern is to make her a more reliable consumer. On another level, however, she invites and participates in this process of commodification because it is such a relief to masquerade as a thing (a "feminine woman") instead of enduring the painful ambivalence of uncommodified subjectivity.[1] That fashion magazines sell products by persuading women that they need various accessories in order to be "feminine" is common knowledge; but what Plath explores in her novel, journals, letters, and poetry is the extent to which this commercial project can pervade a woman's personality until that "personality" is nothing more than a package designed to catch the eye of the discerning masculine consumer: "This is how it was. I dressed slowly, smoothing, perfuming, powdering. . . . This is I, I thought, the American virgin, dressed to seduce. I know I'm in for an evening of sexual

pleasure" (*Journals* 9). The profound dissociation Plath delineates here is not entirely unpleasant because a "proper" appearance assures her that the evening will pass in a predictable, "prepackaged" manner.

She sees her body as a machine that will move through the evening with her sitting safely inside, peering out of the mask of confidence that "perfuming" and "powdering" have created. But we can also see in this reverie the construction of what Esther will later perceive as a glass bell jar that makes going to parties—even being alive—seem to have nothing to do with her: "I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. . . . I couldn't get myself to react" (*Bell Jar* 2). There have been many interpretations of the "bell jar" metaphor, but one I have not seen mentioned is that being encased in glass brings to mind the plate-glass windows of department stores, where "women" (mannequins) strike a "feminine" pose with such perfection that only a dead woman could hope to rival it. In her poem "The Munich Mannequins" Plath states: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children" (1). The mannequins themselves are described as "intolerable, without mind." Having become increasingly "numb," Esther imagines "that anybody with half an eye would see I didn't have a brain in my head" (126). The relationship of the poem's "perfect" and "mindless" mannequins to the "perfumed" and "powdered" "American virgin" machine is explicit: "Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose" (5).

We can see, then, that the initial security of functioning like a "feminine" machine is followed by an increasing fear that one is trapped within a perfection in which any sign of individual life is unacceptable. It is this later despair that Plath chronicles in her poem "In Plaster":

> I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
> This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
> And the white person is certainly the superior one.
> She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
> At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality—

She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was
Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.
(1-8)

In a *Mademoiselle* article entitled "Accessory after the Body" (August 1953), beauty columnist Bernice Peck states that "[a] body isn't necessarily a figure. A body is what you've been given, a figure is what you make of it. . . . Doing this can be a lot of trouble or a little, depending upon how close to the ideal are your own given proportions" (87). A body "isn't necessarily a figure" because a perfect figure would in fact be "a dead body"! Indeed, the "figure" of "In Plaster" relentlessly pursues perfection until the living body is murderously resented by the "perfect" figure as something fatally flawed: "And secretly she began to hope I'd die./ Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,/ And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case/ Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water" (39-42). Poignantly, the speaker catalogues her increasingly reluctant participation in her own self-murder.

As late in her life as 1958-59, Plath was still entranced by the idea of speaking as a commodity: "Ironically, I have my own dream, which is mine, and not the American dream. I want to write funny and tender women's stories. I must also be funny and tender and not a desperate woman, like mother" (*Journals* 254). But it is precisely the pressure to masquerade as "funny and tender"—certainly two principal qualities of what is stereotypically regarded as "normal femininity"—that leaves Plath feeling "desperate." Only in fantasy can she dissolve this paradox:

Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother. . . . I spoke, almost in tears, of how much she and Arthur Miller meant to us. . . . She gave me an expert manicure. I had not washed my hair and asked her about hairdressers, saying no matter where I went, they al-

> ways imposed a horrid cut on me. She invited me to visit her during the Christmas holidays, promising a new, flowering life. (*Journals* 319)

The Monroe/Miller marriage is an apt representation of the tension Plath feels; she wishes to speak as a subject against the dehumanizing commodity culture, while at the same time preserving—even improving—her "feminine" allure as a valuable object within this same culture. It is equally significant that Monroe asks Plath to visit over Christmas, when shopping reaches its ecstatic apotheosis.

To return to *The Bell Jar*, the cosmetic kit and the sunglasses case are the only things Esther has preserved from the period of her youthful enthusiasm, through her breakdown and suicide attempt, all the way to her reconstruction as a wife and mother. In other words, the eminently disposable cosmetic kit survives unchanged while Esther's sense of self undergoes profound transformations and nearly disappears altogether. Part of my argument is that the powerful attraction of this gift represents Esther's ambivalent yearning to conform to a permanent standard of "femininity," even though she recognizes that to do so trivializes her status as a person. She is drawn to the compact because it appears intimately "fitted" to her; yet she also knows that it is a mass-produced object designed to standardize a woman's "look" into conformity to a male-defined concept of "feminine appearance" ("it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved").

An example of Esther's painful attraction to and repulsion for socially constructed guidelines for "femininity" is the scene where she is to be photographed for *Ladies' Day.* It is toward the end of her internship at the magazine, and Esther is "supposed to be photographed with props to show what [she] wanted to be" (82). Struggling to avoid bursting into tears, she quietly mentions that she would like to be a poet, and this is rapidly translated into a saleable "feminine" image: "I said I wanted to be a poet. Then they scouted about for something for me to hold. . . . Finally Jay Cee unclipped the single, long-stemmed paper rose from her latest hat. The photographer fiddled with his hot white

lights. 'Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem'" (83). The photographer is demanding what, in a different context, Plath calls "the smile of accomplishment" ("Edge" 3). A moment later, after she begins to cry uncontrollably, everyone in the room "vanishes"; she feels "limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it" (83). Esther's successful, if involuntary, rejection of the "feminization" of her desire to be a poet brings her relief, and yet the "terrible animal" she has vanquished seems to have been inexplicably (and inextricably) connected to her "spirit."

It is significant that Esther's effort to restore her "spirit" involves peering into the mirror of the compact: "I fumbled in my pocket book for the gilt compact with the mascara and the mascara brush and the eye-shadow and the three lipsticks and the side mirror. The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell. . . . I started to paint it with a small heart" (83-84). Esther's curious recitation of each feature of the compact seems like a litany intended to calm her, as if describing its integrity as an object will somehow forestall her increasing fragmentation as a subject. And yet this compulsive catalogue also sounds like an advertisement. As I hope to show in more detail, consumption for a woman resembles praying for relief from one's imperfections; in this equation, "original sin" is the regrettably human body with which a woman is born, and advertised commodities—paid for and prayed for—bestow grace in the form of a "perfect figure." Esther's reference to her face as "it" suggests that she sees it not as her own, but rather as the face of the "terrible animal." This animal, I would suggest, is nothing less than the "properly" made up and attired "feminine woman" who revitalizes Esther's commercially viable "spirit" while further demoralizing her *self*-worth.

Likewise, the "new absolutely white person" of "In Plaster" is also seen as the "spirit" who keeps the narrator from going limp: "I wasn't in any position to get rid of her./ She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp—/ I had even forgotten how to walk or sit" (43-45). The

ephemera of "femininity" are offered to a woman as a soft, easily applied plaster; once in place, the plaster slowly hardens into a mask and a body cast that are more visible and permanent than the suddenly disposable person inside. Cosmetics and fashion products are given talismanic properties by the advertisements that market them. Countless slogans in the *Mademoiselle* magazines of the 1950s (not to mention more current issues) promise to transform a woman into a "woman": "Hollywood-Maxwell makes the most of you with the inch-adding glamour of Her Secret Whirlpool Bras. It's a matter of morale to have those curves that make such a difference to your clothes" (*Mademoiselle*, August 1953). By the end of this pitch, a woman understands that she must secretly pad "herself" into a "woman" in order to be worthy of her clothes (to which, by implication, she is inherently inferior)! If her clothes should go limp, the advertisement warns, it will devastate "morale." The narrator of "In Plaster" presents the same formula with a note of self-deprecating desperation: "She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,/ And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful—/ Wasting her days waiting on a half-corpse!" (36-38). In this context, we can see that when the narrator describes the "superior woman" as "this new absolutely white person . . . much whiter" than "the old yellow one," she is directly echoing the basic pitch of literally thousands of advertisements in fashion magazines.

Marjorie Perloff has typified Esther's plight as that of "a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject" (507). I would claim that magazines such as *Mademoiselle* specify guidelines on how to masquerade as "feminine," and that Plath's attitude is that "she can neither accept nor reject" these. In *The Bell Jar* Plath highlights the influence of the *Mademoiselle* lifestyle by presenting Esther's increasingly suicidal desperation in the bouncy, no-nonsense style of a self-help article: "After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck . . . I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight. . . . I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks. . . . I would simply have to ambush

it" (130). Phrases such as "a discouraging time," "all sorts of little tricks," and "simply have to" mimic the favorite jargon of beauty columnists, and indeed, much of the disconcerting tone of *The Bell Jar* stems from Plath's use of "trivial" beauty-tip jargon to describe suicide. Ending one's life and ending one's commitment to a given cosmetic product are treated identically. Surrounded and defined by ephemeral objects and trivial prose, it is Esther herself who comes to feel "disposable"—or "like the skin shed by a terrible animal"—and it is the trivial, plaster-perfect woman who becomes increasingly permanent.

The description of the makeup kit is the only moment in *The Bell Jar* when Esther invokes her present existence: "I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then. . . ." The persistence of these items suggests that Esther's eventual "cure" is really a dangerous abandonment of her "old yellow" self and a reassertion of herself as a "feminine" consumer ready to place herself once again within the matrix of what *Ladies' Day* defines as "a woman": "My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new. . . . But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (199). There is a contradiction in Esther's thought; the optimism of being reborn is considerably undercut by her metaphor of being "retreaded." Pamela Annas has written that in Plath's work "one senses a continual struggle to be reborn into some new present" (178), and this is an apt description of what the commodity must do if it is to remain current. Esther is reborn in the sense that a commodity is reborn; she must be "approved for the road" if she is to leave the asylum. It seems understood that "health" means resuming her role as a consumer who buys commodities in order to appear as a "woman" on the sexual marketplace.

If Esther must be deemed sufficiently "feminine" before she is allowed back into circulation, the board that oversees the asylum and the

board that oversees the production of *Ladies' Day* seem to have a good deal in common. Lacan argues that "images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman. It is representation . . . of feminine sexuality . . . which conditions how it comes into play" (90). Major sources of gender representation, movies, magazine articles, and advertisements (as well as other types of popular culture) instruct the masculine or feminine subject on how to market sexuality; thus the constant description in *Ladies' Day* of "feminine" appearance and behavior also molds Esther's sexuality. When Constantin fails to seduce her in the manner she expected, for example, she can only understand this failure by assuming that her face does not sufficiently resemble those of magazine models: "I thought if only I had a keen, shapely bone structure to my face . . . Constantin might find me interesting enough to sleep with" (67). Of course she also derives her sense of what is "masculine" from media representations, and thus again finds reality disappointing: "The same thing happened over and over: I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all" (67).

It is fitting that a women's magazine should serve as the unacknowledged arbiter of whether Esther is ready to leave the asylum. *Mademoiselle* issues of the 50s constantly featured articles offering women "free" psychoanalysis in the form of self-help articles that traced all emotional problems to the type of makeup, perfume, or tampon that women were purchasing. In the August 1953 issue, for example, for which Plath served as guest managing editor, we read this: "Start with the surface, because that's what shows, then work your way down to the big basics. Consider that venerable saying: You're as young as you feel. Substitute: You feel as vital as you look" (Peck, "Vitality" 47). This substitution, which creates a new (improved!) saying, also argues that mental well-being can only be maintained by using the proper commodities in the prescribed manner. We have already seen Esther engaged in this process when she attempts to recover from her tears by

taking out her compact and "painting" the "surface" of her face.

In both *The Bell Jar* and *Mademoiselle* mental breakdowns are eerily synonymous with the inability (or refusal) to consume "feminine" products "correctly." In the March 1952 issue of *Mademoiselle*, an article entitled "What Makes You Beautiful?" begins with the remarks of a psychiatrist to a woman who has just entered the office:

> Ah. Miss X. Come in. Just lie down on the couch and relax. I should like to hear you free-associate from this word: June. June. Now say anything that comes into your head.
>
> *June . . . commencements . . . vacations . . . dancing by the lake . . . weddings, brides . . . love, loveliness . . .*
>
> *Dr. Lincoln, may I use my pocket mirror?*
>
> Why, my dear, you're quite normal. No need for psychiatric counsel. All healthy and sound. (60)

Dr. Lincoln—the very name suggesting honesty—sees a sane woman as one devoted to her public appearance to the exclusion of all else. This woman's "free" association begins with a recitation of public events; all, of course, will require makeup, perfume, bubble bath, shampoo, soap, skin lotion, brassieres, girdles, slips, tampons, new shoes, and the other commodities advertised in *Mademoiselle*.[2]

This catalogue of events segues into a concern with the primary interest of the ideal "feminine" consumer—"love, loveliness." This, in turn, calls up the action that also occurs frequently in *The Bell Jar:* "Dr. Lincoln, may I use my pocket mirror?" When a woman looks at her reflection, as this article makes clear, she is expected to evaluate her appearance in accordance with an imagined male gaze: "What is beauty, then?" the psychiatrist continues, and proceeds to answer the question. "I'm not sure, but let's start wondering about it like this: What do people see when they see you? . . . You are talking about yourself in everything that they see. Even your clothes and the way you do your hair and use your lipstick are not externals behind which you hide but an ex-

pression of your attitude toward yourself and the world at large" (128). Esther signals the beginning of her breakdown by tossing her clothes, one by one, out of her hotel window. Following this unsuccessful attempt to be "reborn" outside of the commodity culture, she attempts a further rebellion by diligently neglecting her appearance and hygiene: "I was still wearing Betsy's white blouse and dirndl skirt. They drooped a bit now, as I hadn't washed them in my three weeks at home. The sweaty cotton gave off a sour but friendly smell. I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either" (104). Just as Esther's "recovery" requires her return to the image of a "woman," her breakdown involves the refusal to use any commodities whatsoever.[3]

One could argue that this is just a trivial side effect of her general depression, but it is her appearance—and her sudden refusal to administer to it with beauty products—that Esther records in excruciating detail. In one *Mademoiselle* article body odor is referred to as "social suicide," and we can see both Esther's disgust at exuding such a taboo odor ("sour") and her contradictory valorization of it as at least a natural product of her own body ("friendly"). "What Makes You Beautiful?" goes on to state, with nearly hysterical hyperbole, how shocking an unkempt appearance is:

> Stringy hair and crooked lipstick are not simply flaws in your appearance, they are a flagrant discourtesy, a brush-off for humanity. "What do *I* care," they say, "how you think I look?" . . . *The spirit* can do with a bit of good grooming, too. The little sloths and greeds, petulances, and pretentiousnesses are the run-down heels and dirty nails of the inner life. (129; emphasis added)

Esther seems both alarmed and pleased that her appearance is, to judge from *Ladies' Day* rhetoric, an affront to all who see her. Before her breakdown, it is Esther herself who treats hygiene as the cure for the "dirty nails of the inner life": "There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them. Whenever I'm sad

I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep, or in love with somebody I won't be seeing for a week, I . . . say: 'I'll go take a hot bath'" (16). The constellation of advertisement rhetoric swirling around Esther delimits her conscious subjectivity. Her breakdown therefore involves a deliberate and painfully conscious lapse in hygiene; correspondingly, her recovery is announced by her new dress, polished shoes, and renewed concern that her appearance should suggest the supposed inner calm that will reassure all who look at her.[4]

In a *Mademoiselle* column entitled "There's Nothing Like It," Peck writes of a bath as though it were a religious sacrament:

> On a day like this the tub's the place. . . . Drop a capful of bath fragrance into the water. . . . Slide on the light but rich cream that will soften [your skin], or the thin, cooling mask that will brighten its color. On your lids, drop eye pads drenched in cooling lotion. . . . Now reach for your fat cake of soap. . . . Comes now the sweet conclusion of a bath, the finale with fragrance. . . . pour some in your palm and splash it on in real open handed luxury. (80)

Clearly Esther's devout praise of the bath echoes such rhetoric; what is missing from Esther's description, however, is the extensive catalogue of products and the elaborate instructions on how to consume them as quickly as possible. All that remains is the faith that a clean woman is a proper "woman." This is an unsettling example of how an ideology designed to sell products becomes in her anxious mind a list of commandments dictating what it means to be a "woman" and what it means to be "neurotic."

In Esther's bath ritual it is the stain of "unfeminine" emotions and behaviors that is washed away: "All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure" (17). In her journals Plath is even more exact in comparing the ritual of cleansing herself with religious rituals of self-purification:

> Upstairs, in the bright, white, sterile cubicle of the bathroom, smelling of warm flesh and toothpaste, I bent over the washbowl in unthinking ritual, washing the proscribed areas, worshiping the glittering chromium. . . . Hot and cold, cleanliness coming in smooth scented green bars. . . . the colored prescriptions, the hard, glassed-in jars, the bottles that can cure the symptoms of a cold or send you to sleep within an hour. . . . And you are the moving epitome of all this. Of you, by you, for you. (13)

The center of this holy "mass" is the mass-produced "feminine" consumer/supplicant. There is a resentful tone in Plath's description about "washing the proscribed areas"; why should a part of her body that demands care and attention be "proscribed" or "condemned"? But this slightly resentful, somewhat rebellious tone gives way to one of gratitude for the value and meaning that cosmetic products appear to bestow on the female body. To proscribe certain parts of her anatomy, in order to glorify the female body as a whole, makes Plath feel important and even goddess-like: "you are the moving epitome of all this." The multiple descriptions of the texture, smell, color, and shape of the soap make this "trivial" mass-produced item seem a talisman with the ability to ward off gender insecurity and identity fragmentation. It operates as the "communion wafer" in the sacrament of hygiene.

A more complex product than soap is one Plath uses to signal shifts in her personality. When Plath dyes her hair blonde one summer after she has come home from Smith College, her mother verifies the primary marketing thesis of *Mademoiselle*, which is that all alterations in a "woman"'s appearance initiate psychological shifts: "It was more than a surface alteration; she was 'trying out' a more daring, adventuresome personality" (*Letters* 138). Upon returning to Smith, Plath resumes her original hair color and writes to her mother that "my brown haired personality is most studious, charming, and earnest. I like it and have changed back to colorless nail polish" (141). In a later report she adds, "I am so happy with my brown hair and studious self! I really can concentrate for hours on end" (146). Several months after terminating

her "blonde haired personality," Plath is sufficiently detached to propose it as the subject of a short story. She writes to her mother, "Tomorrow I begin my story 'Platinum Summer' (I changed it from 'Peroxide' and think the tone is better)" (177). Plath uses cosmetics to live her life as a fiction, and then fictionalizes this life in order to understand its significance.

In *The Bell Jar* Plath takes this idea a step further; Doreen is in fact "Doreen"—a platinum blonde, sexually aggressive version of Esther herself. There is ample, though subtle, evidence in *The Bell Jar* that "Doreen" is none other than Esther after she has dyed her hair in order to explore her sexuality with a directness that the *Mademoiselle* ideology would most certainly forbid. The form of its condemnation would be moral, but the logic behind it would be economic: Men do not want to buy a used product. Indeed, Esther kills off "Doreen" after the incident with Lenny, much as Plath returned to her "brown haired personality." This qualified self-murder is performed in the bathtub—that place most favored by *Mademoiselle* beauty columnists for experimentation with new soaps, scents, and hair dyes—and both "Doreen" and the experience with Lenny are rinsed away: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving . . . they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure" (17). When "Doreen" is brought back to the hotel, she repeats Esther's alias, "Elly," even as the woman who has brought her to the door calls "Miss Greenwood"; Esther awakes with the feeling that both voices are inside her head: "'Elly, Elly, Elly,' the first voice mumbled, while the other voice went on hissing, 'Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood,' as if *I had a split personality or something*" (17; emphasis added). When Esther opens the door she has the dislocating sense that "it wasn't night and it wasn't day, but some lurid third interval that had suddenly slipped between them and would never end" (17-18). Perhaps the most significant detail, in the context of Plath's letters, is that Esther realizes in this "lurid third interval" that Doreen has dyed her hair blonde: "*I couldn't see her face be-*

cause her head was hanging down on her chest and her stiff blonde hair fell down from its dark roots like a hula fringe" (18; emphasis added). "Doreen," whom Esther earlier worships as someone "white and unbreakable" as the alter ego of "In Plaster," is left in the hallway with her roots showing, while the "pure" Esther goes back to bed.

Although Esther introduces Doreen as "a good friend," her one-sentence introduction presents Doreen as a troubling aspect of her own personality: "I guess one of my troubles was Doreen" (4). The "trouble" is that "everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (6). Doreen is the disembodied voice that orbits around the commodified Esther. It is Doreen who states that "Yalies . . . are *stoo-pit*," and Esther is then free to follow this pronouncement by her "secret voice" with the conscious observation that "Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid" (6). A movie that Esther sees during her internship shows that her strategy of splitting herself into "good" and "bad" has been institutionalized by society: "The movie starred a nice blond girl . . . and a sexy black-haired girl. . . . Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to wind up with nobody" (34). Esther and Doreen present the same division as the two women in the movie. Esther must experience the "sexy" world through the blonde "Doreen," because then—by rinsing the dye from her hair—she can resume her existence as a "brown haired personality" still eligible for marriage. The implicit message of the film is that a woman must first divide herself and then banish the sensual half. A girl is either "nice" or she is not; she is either loved for denying her needs, or she is abandoned as punishment for exploring the world on her own, for using her unpredictable emotions and desires as a guide.

Esther's remarkably cruel decision to leave Doreen lying in the hall, face down in her own vomit, takes on a different dimension if we understand that what Esther is locking out is the "blonde personality" who has participated in a drunken one-night stand: "I felt if I carried

Doreen across the threshold *into my room* and helped her *onto my bed I would never get rid of her again*" (18; emphasis added). This would explain why the matronly woman who first brings Doreen to the door, and who works all night on this floor, never notices that Esther has left "Doreen" in the hallway. It would explain as well why Esther wishes to "run after her and tell her I had nothing to do with Doreen, because she looked stern and hardworking and moral . . . and reminded me of my Austrian grandmother" (18). In the morning, however, it is the "brown haired personality" who has "splashed [her] face with cold water and put on some lipstick and opened the door slowly" (19). Not surprisingly, she fears that "Doreen" might not have disappeared after all: "I think I still expected to see Doreen's body lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony *to my own dirty nature*" (19; emphasis added). Changing one's appearance to approximate different moods is, of course, a staple of cosmetic advertisements. Nail-polish names such as "Plum Crazy," lipstick shades such as "Passion Red," seductively invite the consumer to generate a new personality by applying a new color. What Plath shows us in *The Bell Jar* is that this strategy can be taken further; a woman in the 1950s can explore her own sexual desire while using one hair color, and then revert to a "studious" hair color and colorless nail polish, thus preserving an image of "femininity" that both a hardworking mother and a "moral Austrian grandmother" will consider "proper."

In essence, Esther converts a beauty tip and an advertising appeal into a profound psychological strategy: alter the all-important surface appearance to bridge the gap between the merely human and the "perfect." By inventing "Doreen," Esther is able to pretend that a sexual situation that reveals what her culture would regard as her "dirty nature" actually happened to someone else—someone she now banishes in exchange for yet another commodified, and therefore "safe," personality: "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her inno-

cent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (19). "When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue," Esther tells us (66). The banishment of the "dirty" Doreen is a suicide of sorts, as the banishment of the platinum blonde may have been for Plath, and it suggests that "killing off" any frightening, "unfeminine" emotions and experiences—a strategy routinely recommended in *Mademoiselle*—can make actual suicide seem the ultimate beautification and "purging" ritual.

Joan also appears to be a satellite persona of Esther: "Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up" (179). Whereas "Doreen" is Esther's "secret voice," "Joan" is "a wry, black image" of her thoughts and feelings. If "Doreen" is "unfeminine" in that she indulges her sexual appetite without apology or restraint, "Joan" is "unfeminine" because she prefers to be physically intimate with women. "Joan" does not appear interested in cosmetics or fashion accessories. Her hair is "tousled," and Esther notes her involvement in sports with fascinated suspicion.

Predictably, part of Esther's aversion to lesbianism is that its rules of courtship and sex have not been commodified, and so she cannot visualize it: "'But what were they *doing*?' I had asked. Whenever I thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never really imagine what they would be actually doing" (180). Likewise, she cannot imagine any basis for attraction: "'I don't see what women see in other women,' I'd told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. 'What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?' Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, 'Tenderness.' That shut me up" (179). In the world of commodified "femininity," women are rivals for the attention of a man; thus all they can "see," in socially constructed terms, is the extent to which another woman attracts the gaze of the male consumer. Dr. Nolan's comment derails Esther's notion that all response must be codified by popular media, her assumption that when one is not told what to feel, one feels nothing. It is small wonder that the word

"tenderness" immediately "shuts up" Esther, since her sexual encounters with men have been characterized by alienation (Buddy), indifference (Constantin), rape (Marco), and selfish ignorance (Irwin). Plath presents a carefully constructed irony here; the invariable physical and psychological abuse of Esther's heterosexual experience is viewed as "normal," while the idea of two women embracing makes her "want to puke" (179)!

In the end, the most damning thing Esther can say about lesbians is that they appear to be abject failures as "feminine" women; that is to say, they seem indifferent to the complex appeals and guidelines in *Ladies' Day:* "I remember a minor scandal at our college dormitory when a fat, matronly-breasted senior, homely as a grandmother and a pious Religion major, and a tall, gawky freshman with a history of being deserted at an early hour in all sorts of ingenious ways by her blind date, started seeing too much of each other" (179). We can readily recognize, I think, the self-preserving patriarchal explanation for lesbianism: women who prefer other women to men as sexual partners do so because they are too "homely" and "gawky" to attract a man anyway. This equation covers over the more damning possibility that some women successfully reject a culturally constructed "femininity." Irigaray asserts that "the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals" (192), and Esther's unkind description makes it equally clear that lesbianism is an economic as well as a sexual threat to the patriarchal order; one of the women she describes, for example, does not mind being "fat" (and therefore will be uninterested in girdles), and the other no longer seeks validation from churlish blind dates (thus ensuring that she will be indifferent to advertising appeals to "capture her prince" by using the latest product).

The "tenderness" to which Dr. Nolan alludes refers—at least in part—to the idea of women valuing one another without debilitating reference to a male standard of "femininity." The "famous woman poet" at Esther's college lives with a woman who sports a shockingly unfashionable hairstyle: "a stumpy old Classical scholar with a cropped Dutch

cut" (180). Again, Esther parrots the economic concerns of the fashion industry when she belittles a hairstyle that is easy to maintain without dyes, curlers, conditioners, and other products. This same poet challenges Esther's declaration that she will have "a pack of children someday" by asking, "What about your *career*?" (180), and even though this is precisely the question Esther has asked herself through much of the novel, in the context of lesbianism she rejects this concern as unnatural: "Why did I attract these weird old women?" (180). It is, of course, she who is attracted to them, and who impresses them only to reject them as "unfeminine" when they suggest concrete measures for achieving her career goals.

Just as with "Doreen," Esther feels a need to kill "Joan" because she stands for an aspect of sexuality unrepresented by the image of "femininity" that Esther has been taught to value. Esther purges with a hot bath the "dirty" sexual excess represented by "Doreen," but shocks "Joan" into suicide by her deliberately graphic presentation of her bloody sexual encounter with Irwin: "I bent down, with a brief grunt, and slipped off one of my winter-cracked black Bloomingdale shoes. I held the shoe up, before Joan's enlarged, pebbly eyes, tilted it, and watched her take in the stream of blood that cascaded onto the beige rug" (188-89). This performance (red blood poured onto a beige rug from a black shoe) is clearly designed for maximum shock value. Earlier Esther views Irwin as "a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites," and her position relative to "Joan" seems to be that a woman must sacrifice herself to sex rather than opting for unimaginable (that is, unrepresented) demonstrations of "tenderness" with other women. Esther experiences "Joan"'s funeral as a self-murder much like her discarding of her dresses: "All during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying" (198). Immediately upon the death of "Joan," Esther is suddenly declared "normal," and she endures the final societal ritual of being "patched, retreaded and approved for the road."

In Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" the narrator tells us that "dying/ is an

art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well" (43-45). The lines startle us because, as so often in *The Bell Jar*, a desperate and permanent measure is described as though it were an everyday cosmetic strategy. Here the narrator discusses different methods of self-destruction—as well as the overall "purifying" ritual of suicide—as if she were presenting makeup techniques that "banish" unwanted lives: "I am only thirty./ And like the cat I have nine times to die" (20-21). In the famous conclusion of this poem, the suddenly powerful woman has particular vividness because the transformation process involves a dramatic alteration in the color of her hair: "I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air" (83-84). Clearly the allusion is to the mythical phoenix; but given Plath's careful use of brown and blonde hair in her letters, journals, and fiction, I think it fair to suggest that the "miraculous" purging ritual of suicide described in "Lady Lazarus"—a ritual that leads fantastically to transformation and rebirth rather than to physical death—may also be a mythification of the equally fantastic transformative powers promised to the "feminine" consumer.

Advertisements invite women to "discover the new you" by murdering some personalities and celebrating others through the use of cosmetics. The pursuit of perfection, as outlined by the process that commodifies "femininity," is both self-deluding and self-destructive. The perfectly commodified "woman" (that is, a female consumer) is presumed to have no essential subjectivity, but only an assortment of assumed personalities that the advertised products make possible. Perfection "cannot have children," as Plath writes in "The Munich Mannequins," and as she observes in one of her last poems, the "perfect" woman is therefore a corpse (the closest approximation a woman can make to the "perfect" appearance of a lifeless mannequin): "The woman is perfected./ Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment" ("Edge" 1-3). By saying "*the* smile of accomplishment" rather than "*a* smile," Plath implies that the "look" of a successful "woman" is as consistent and mass-produced as a registered trademark.

Even when performing a task as simple as ordering a drink, Esther's

confidence is derived from an advertisement: "I'd seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked pure and cold as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right" (8-9). In order to see why Esther refers to an advertisement when trying to choose a drink that will be "all right," one has to understand that any issue of *Mademoiselle* contains half a dozen "dos-and-don'ts" on each page. Both articles and advertisements constantly outline what is "all right" and what is not. "Everyone stares at a 'slip-up' wherever it may occur," threatens the ad for a type of slip that "never" reveals itself to the vigilance of "everyone." The copy goes on to report that "this incident is based upon the actual experience of an embarrassed young lady who has now wisely switched to Mary Barron slips for her comfort and peace of mind" (August 1953). The ad seems overwrought and silly, but compare it to Esther's desperate attempt to cook her hot dog "the right way" even as she is battling suicidal depression: "We browned hot dogs on the public grills at the beach, and by watching . . . very carefully I managed to cook my hot dog just the right amount of time and didn't burn it or drop it into the fire, the way I was afraid of doing. Then, when nobody was looking, I buried it in the sand" (127). This is an astonishing description of a simple task, given that neither cooking the hot dog nor even eating it matters in the least. Her sole concern is to "do it right"; she then surreptitiously buries it for fear she might still "slip up" and be exposed to the stare of "everyone."

Indeed, much of the "fun" described in *The Bell Jar*—the outings designed by the magazine, the drinks with Lenny and his friends, picnics, the Yale prom, and so on—seems deliberately to imitate *an advertiser's idea* of a fun time; the people involved seem to feel they are having fun in direct proportion to how closely they are able to approximate what they have been told is fun: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes

I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match" (2). "Having the time of [one's] life" involves having the right accessories. Many of the magazine-sponsored activities are photographed for consumption by the hordes of envious girls who will use these photographs to imagine their own "fun": "And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on—drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion—everybody would think I must be having a real whirl" (2). Choosing a drink has come full circle; whereas Esther thought of a vodka advertisement before ordering her drink, someone in the Midwest might well think of Esther's picture in *Ladies' Day* and then order a martini. Clearly the magazine sponsors these outings in order to associate the concept of "fun" with the process of consuming designated products in a prescribed manner.

Significantly, this very picture "comes out" after Esther's suicide attempt, and even makes its way into the asylum: "The magazine photograph showed a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split, with a whole lot of boys bending around her. The girl . . . seemed to have her eyes fixed over my shoulder on something that stood behind me, a little to my left" (169-70). In this highly manufactured image, Esther is the desirable commodity surrounded by male would-be consumers. As I've already suggested, she sees her retreat to the asylum as removing her from the sexual marketplace.[5] But the magazine follows her there. In this scenario, at least, the well-known Plathian "split-self" involves the "woman" as a self-produced commodity ("something that stood behind me") and the biological woman who is struggling for an identity apart from the powerful semiotic network of "femininity" represented in issue after issue of *Ladies' Day*. To reiterate my principal thesis, "femininity" is a cultural construct defined in terms of male desire and designed to instruct a woman on how

to become a "woman"; that is, how to package her sexuality in a manner that appeals to the male consumer.[6] And yet the fiction that the "properly feminine" consumer will attract a "perfect" man is exposed by Esther's point that the "young men with all-American bone structures" were "hired or loaned for the occasion." Presumably, women who come upon the photograph will envy "the girls" because they have attracted handsome men (just as all the ads promise!). The overall implication is that all women are the same ("girls just like me all over America"), and the only activity that might distinguish them in the eyes of male consumers is how effectively they consume beauty products.

Predictably enough in this context, some of the most ecstatic moments in Plath's college journals center on her construction of a "correct" image of "femininity" through shopping: "Sunlight raying ethered through the white-net of the new formal bought splurgingly yesterday in a burst of ecstatic rightness. . . . God knows when I've felt this blissful beaming euphoria, this ineluctable ecstasy!" (76). In *The Bell Jar*, however, Esther reaches the heart of darkness in this commercial network and realizes that "femininity" is an illusion carefully and expensively manufactured to produce profit at the expense of the insecure female consumer. Her final action before her descent into depression is to destroy the accessories that mark her as a commodified "woman": "I grasped the bundle I carried and pulled at a pale tail. A strapless elasticized slip which, in the course of wear, had lost its elasticity, slumped into my hand. I waved it, like a flag of truce. . . . Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind . . . flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off" (91). As in "Lady Lazarus," one incarnation is incinerated in the hope that something new will arise from the ashes.

The August "college" issues of *Mademoiselle* often praise women for their intelligence but remind them at the same time that the truly intelligent woman will not forget that her only viable goal is to attract a man: "Plane curves are for the math books," states a brassiere adver-

tisement in the August 1953 issue. "For *captivating* curves, try Hidden Treasure—the only bra designed to add perfection to the A-minus, B-minus, or C-minus cup." A woman's grade point average (a standardized measurement of her intelligence and perseverance) is trivial compared to her cup size (a standardized measurement of her value as a "woman"). Calling a padded brassiere "Hidden Treasure" suggests that a "woman"'s body is her capital, and any commodity she buys to enhance its apparent worth is a wise investment. "Being a woman," Plath writes, "I must be clever and obtain as full a measure of security for those approaching ineligible and aging years wherein I will not have the chance to capture a new mate" (*Journals* 36). The commercial equation is clear: a female must consume "feminine" products in order to package herself as a "woman." What she spends on various commodities is an investment that will increase the capital of her body, which in turn becomes worth more when it appears in the sexual marketplace.[7]

Irigaray asserts that women can view other women only as potential rivals because the value of a woman is determined with reference to a third, male-defined term: "Commodities can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their 'guardians'. . . . And the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals" (196).[8] As a college student, one reason Plath fears marriage is that she sees the married woman as one who can no longer "shop around" for the best return on the capital she has invested in her body. The man, however, is under no such stricture, and thus a wife is always in danger from rival "products" (other women): "He [any husband] is drawn to attractive women. . . . all through life I would be subject to a physical, hence animal jealousy of other attractive women—always afraid that a shorter girl, one with better breasts, better feet, better hair than I will be the subject of his lust, or love" (*Journals* 38). It is impossible to imagine "better feet" without reference to the marketplace of "feminine" fashion, where the length and width of a woman's foot are standardized. Likewise, "better breasts" would have to be determined by cup

size. Plath continues, "He wants other people to be conscious of his valuable possession. What? You say, 'That is only normal'? Maybe it is only normal, but I resent the hint—of what? of material attitude" (38). Of course there is more than a "hint" of "material attitude" in regarding a woman as an expensive machine. And yet it is certainly a "normal" attitude—as any *Mademoiselle* psychiatrist might assure one.

Indeed, *The Bell Jar* features just such a psychiatrist in the person of the handsome Dr. Gordon, whose prize possession, half turned on his desk so patients can see it, is a photograph of his "normal" family: "How could this Doctor Gordon help me anyway," Esther thinks, "with a beautiful wife and beautiful children and a beautiful dog haloing him like the angels on a Christmas card?" (106). He too has a standardized psychological concept of a "woman"—the mental equivalent of a girdle. He ends his first interview with her by recalling a WAC station where he was the doctor for "the lot" of "a pretty bunch of girls" (107). A "lot," of course, is a commercial term that designates a large number of identical products. Likewise, in the photograph of the guest editorial staff for the August 1953 *Mademoiselle*, the 12 young women are dressed identically. The misogyny in seeing all women as part of "the lot" is demonstrated by Marco, the "woman-hater": "I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards" (87). What remains central is the commodified female body, a passive symbol of economic exchange in a commodity culture. "Sluts, all sluts," Marco declares. "Yes or no, it is all the same" (90). "Without the exploitation of the body-matter of women," Irigaray asks, "what would become of the symbolic process that governs society? What modification would this process, this society, undergo, if women, who have been only objects of consumption or exchange, necessarily aphasic, were to become a 'speaking subject' as well?" (85). Or as Buddy Willard's

mother puts it, "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (58).

A *Mademoiselle* article entitled "So You're a Brain . . ." reassures a woman that her intelligence need not preclude her becoming a "woman" if she remembers that her body is her stock portfolio and that she will best use her intelligence to enhance her appearance to fit the transcendent standard of (male-defined) "femininity," and, by so doing, increase her fiscal worth:

> The fact that you have brains does not at all mean that you cannot be or should not be frivolous, seductive, coquettish and alluring—all at the right times. . . . It means that you, unlike your less intelligent friends, can be frivolous without being stupid, seductive without being vulgar, coquettish without being coy and alluring without acting like a poor man's imitation movie queen. . . . Being intelligent means that you will make the most of your sex appeal. . . . your general contours are observable at a greater distance than your I.Q. and he's pretty sure to look at you before he talks to you. (Woodring 361)

This article is also written by a kindly psychologist, and once again the visual, "packaged" quality of cup size is more valuable to an ambitious woman than her GPA. Indeed, noting the emphasis on psychology in *Mademoiselle* articles, one comes to recognize that Esther's narration, in addition to mocking advertising copy, also presents a bitter parody of this breezy psychoanalysis of women that consistently concludes that "unfeminine" qualities and "neurotic" traits are synonymous. In both Dr. Gordon's office and *Mademoiselle*, women who resist masquerading as "feminine" are mentally ill and need to be shocked back to their senses.

In this regard Plath makes clear that the shock treatments administered to the dangerously "unfeminine" Esther have a corollary in the electrocution of the dangerously "un-American" Rosenbergs. It is the psychiatric staff, and not just Esther, who equate her growing "mad-

ness" with her increasingly radical departure from the "feminine" norm. Indeed, the major principle of the therapy Esther receives after her suicide attempt is that she must not be given a mirror! By definition, a woman in an asylum has no value because she has been taken out of circulation. Accordingly, Esther's sense that she is "worthless" is linked to her abandonment of cosmetic "necessities," such as the shaving of her legs. The first time a man from the "normal" world comes to visit, she is overwhelmed with despair: "I had meant to cover my legs if anybody came in, but now I saw it was too late, so I let them stick out, just as they were, disgusting and ugly. 'That's me,' I thought. 'That's what I am'" (141).

Another effect on women who are persuaded to commodify the female body—an effect we can see throughout Plath's work—is that they come to see their bodies as machines they must maintain; this of course complements the "normal" male attitude that a wife should be a possession of which a husband is proud, like a beautiful automobile. In her journal a young Plath (1950) writes this definition of a woman and underlines it: "*Woman is but an engine of ecstasy, a mimic of the earth from the ends of her curled hair to her red-lacquered nails*" (14). And yet she recognizes that this definition is intended to correspond to a male attitude: "Most American males worship woman as a sex machine with rounded breasts and a convenient opening in the vagina" (*Journals* 21-22). The self-help articles in *Mademoiselle* take for granted that the female body is a machine; it is in fact the primary metaphor they use to encourage fashion and beauty "adjustments," and it is equally popular in discussions of how to give one's mental attitude a "tune-up":

> Since they [male bosses] know not what tiredness means, you can hardly expect them to have understanding, much less loving tolerance, for the girl whose energy motor makes rattling noises. So fake it for the boss, whatever you feel like. . . . manage to look bright-eyed, and keep your voice sounding alertly bright too—it's a valid bit of phoniness that helps until you get the rest of you bright and untired too. (Peck, "Tired" 187)

My earlier discussion of Plath's "brown haired personality" also demonstrates the impersonal feeling Plath has toward a body constructed so as to approximate the latest model of "femininity." Her ultimate expression of the commodified female body as a machine is her poem "The Applicant." Here a wife is something that is purchased; the narrator appears to be a male salesperson whose constant refrain, "Will you marry it," has the repetitive insistence we might expect from a used-car salesman. Addressing the male "applicant," the narrator says, "Now your head, excuse me, is empty./ I have the ticket for that./ Come here, sweetie, out of the closet./ Well, what do you think of *that*?" (26-30).

"The Applicant," written in October 1962, is one of the dozens of poems Plath wrote in her famous creative burst towards the end of her life. Many theories have been put forth to explain this remarkable period of creativity and devastating insight, but I am particularly intrigued by the fact that it is during this same month—October 1962—that Plath not only dismisses the world of the women's magazine, she expresses this dismissal in a letter to her mother (as opposed to confining it to the privacy of her journals). Plath's breakaway from the ideology of women's magazines, conducted with the abandon and panache found in "Lady Lazarus," has been insufficiently explored in the explanations for her spectacular final poetry. She writes on 21 October 1962:

> Don't talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What the person out of Belsen—physical or psychological—wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the *worst*, just what it is like. It is much more help for me, for example, to know that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriages. Let the *Ladies' Home Journal* blither about *those*. (*Letters* 473)

There is a clear note of defiant liberation. Before this time, Plath had written more than a few letters to her mother discussing, in a conspira-

torial tone, her long-term plans to write lots of stories for the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Indeed, it is only 10 years before this letter that Plath presents seeing her story in *Mademoiselle* as the most "self"-affirming experience of her life:

> I can hardly believe it's August already, and that my magazine is reposing in my closet, well read. . . . took the car alone for a blissful two hours . . . with a bag of cherries and peaches and the Magazine. I felt the happiest I ever have in my life. . . . I read it . . . chortled happily to myself. . . . I never have felt so utterly happy and free. (*Letters* 91)

It is tempting to dismiss this earlier effusion as absurd adolescent enthusiasm, and to valorize the scornful rejection of the *Ladies' Home Journal* as the "real" Plath, but this would be a disservice to the intricacy of Plath's struggle to have a voice in a world that defined her as an object. The aggressively frivolous and trivial tone of the women's magazine—the constant assertion of the attitude, "We're sorry to be so silly, but we just can't help ourselves"—is in fact an accurate presentation of a grim economic and psychological "truth": any woman who is unwilling or unable to assert her market value as a "woman" (that is, whose body is not on the market as a packaged commodity) must be regarded by "everyone" as having no economic value, and thus as being ineligible for all feelings of self-worth as well.

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Notes

1. The primary characteristic of this "feminine" masquerade, as both Luce Irigaray and Jacques Lacan have suggested, is that a woman attempts to approximate a male-defined fantasy of what a "woman" should be. The idea of "womanliness" as a masquerade was first put forth by Joan Riviere: "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask. . . . The reader may now ask how I define womanliness and the

'masquerade.' My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (38). "Masks are the order of the day," Plath writes in her journal as a college student, "and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (63). Lacan develops the idea of the "feminine masquerade" further: "*The* woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. . . . There is no such thing as *The* woman since of her essence . . . she is not all" (144). The sophistication and difficulty of Lacan's theory are well known, but I find that students who read *The Bell Jar* often intuit his ideas about gender construction when they try to account for Esther's breakdown. One exercise I have found effective is to have the students bring in advertisements from current issues of *Mademoiselle*. Looking at the ads in the context of the novel helps to defamiliarize them (which is also one of Plath's major intentions here—to show how the "trivial" can be disconcertingly profound). For a more thorough discussion of Plath's susceptibility to the cultural construct "femininity," see Leonard, "Renunciation"; for an examination of Lacan's construction of "The Woman," see Leonard, "Question."

2. Mariana Valverde discusses the way a women's magazine presents a particular ideology as a universal value: "Upward mobility, consumerism, competitiveness, keeping up with the Joneses . . . these values are presented as universally valid, as the only values" (78). She also points out that while "femininity" is presented as innate, in fact producing it takes much time and money:

> The Cosmo girl appears as dashing and carefree when she is out in public; but she has spent many hours agonizing in private and doing all the work necessary to produce a feminine image. . . . The labor of producing femininity is highly skilled (a fact not recognized by feminists). . . . The whole point is to create a general impression, an overall image, and to minimize, even obliterate, all the painstaking details that went into producing the image. . . . The details of the labor of femininity are somehow obscene, and not to be talked about in mixed company. Its skills take as long to acquire as those of a carpenter. . . . They're supposed to be "inborn." But because they are not, publishing conglomerates make millions from teaching us these skills. (78)

3. "Tactics" and "strategies" acquire detailed definitions in Michel de Certeau's attempt to highlight the personal political dimension present in each "trivial" act of consumption:

> A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize to its advantage, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. . . . Strategies, in contrast, conceal beneath objective calculations their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own "proper" place or institution. (xx)

Clearly Esther practices "tactics" that give her no more than a brief respite from her ambitions and anxieties. Her craving for free samples from cosmetic companies shows her desire to be satisfied through the "tactic" of consuming "feminine" products, but her decision to throw all her dresses out the window indicates a frightened rebellion against "tactics" that never lead to the economic power and security of "strategies."

4. Esther's sense of a fragmented psyche, which deepens as she turns her back on advertising's definition of "a woman," is not surprising once we understand that ads associate a product with our desire for a unified self: "What the advertisement clearly does is . . . to signify, to represent to us, the object of desire. Since that object is the self, this means that, while ensnaring/creating the subject through his or her exchange of signs, the ad is actually feeding off that subject's own desire for coherence and meaning in him or her self" (Williamson 60).

5. Photographs of women who are stared at by men while they stare at something else appear countless times in women's magazines. This particular composition is best understood with reference to what feminist film theorists such as Mary Ann Doane call the "male gaze": "Feminist film criticism has consistently demonstrated that, in the classical Hollywood cinema, the woman is deprived of a gaze, deprived of subjectivity and repeatedly transformed into the object of a masculine scopophiliac desire" (2). Doane goes on to make a point about the commodification of "femininity" that is relevant to my argument here: "The female spectator is invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself . . . as the image of feminine beauty. 'Buying' here is belief—the image has a certain amount of currency" (24). Also see E. Ann Kaplan:

> Our culture is deeply committed to myths of demarcated sex differences called "masculine" and "feminine," which in turn revolve first on a complex gaze apparatus and second on dominance-submission patterns. This positioning of the two sex genders in representation clearly privileges the male. . . . Men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it. (31)

For a more thorough discussion of gender construction and "masculine" subjectivity, see Leonard, "Grace."

6. Kaja Silverman's comments on Lacanian theory and human "nature" also suggest how influential advertisements can be in the cultural construction of gender: "According to the Lacanian argument, the sexually differentiating scenarios of the culture into which the subject is later assimilated show it the 'way' to 'sexual fulfillment,' the path to personal salvation. . . . human 'nature' finds its logical expression and complement in the cultural definition of 'male' and 'female'" (154).

7. The sexism in the advertisements of the 1950s no doubt seems blatant to the reader—as shocking artifacts of a bygone era. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss current advertisements in *Mademoiselle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and so on, I would not want to imply that they are harmless. Christopher Lasch gives a succinct warning about the more "liberated" advertisements currently directed toward the

"feminine" consumer: "The logic of demand creation requires that women smoke and drink in public, move about freely, and assert their right to happiness instead of living for others. The advertising industry thus encourages the pseudo-emancipation of women, flattering them with its insinuating reminder, 'You've come a long way, baby,' and disguising the freedom to consume as genuine autonomy" (92).

8. For an excellent assessment and critique of Irigaray's theory, see Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics:* "Irigaray's failure to consider the historical and economic specificity of patriarchal power, along with its ideological and material contradictions, forces her into providing exactly the kind of metaphysical definition of woman she declaredly wants to avoid" (148). I agree that Irigaray's tendency to essentialize women is misguided (and, paradoxically, patriarchal in its effect), but her understanding of "woman" as a culturally constructed economic sign is invaluable when trying to point out, as I am doing, the profound importance of "trivial" texts such as *Mademoiselle*.

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Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath:
The Self at Stake

Solenne Lestienne

As a direct retort to femininity, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath are both drawn to feminism and to rebellion against male authority. Unfulfilled in their marriages, they chose to confer a huge importance on writing, an act of reflexivity, as if the self had to come back faithfully to itself. Writing is thus a private affair, as Sylvia Plath's almost autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, shows. The fictional and real selves are nonetheless integrated to their environment. Though communing with nature, the self is attacked by disruption and disjunctive identity. The solace in accomplished motherhood—Sylvia Plath's poems—or found in nearby water—Woolf's solution towards epiphany—is apparently not the way out. Death has an invading effect and suffering spills out of the self. The question of oneness and harmony, when applied to Woolf's *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* and to a selection of Plath's poems and *The Bell Jar*, reveals disjunction and chaos suggestive of a scattered self—or should it be selves? Both authors find a similar solution to the question of the chaos of life: embracing death appears to be their answer to the harsh suffering and despair both in their lives and works, although life has impregnated them so much that death is not without life in their pieces.

To begin with, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath are haunted by chaos. An unforeseeable physical phenomenon, chaos obeys no tangible law. Biblically, chaos is a disorder and a confusion preceding Creation. Chaos can be both external, a traumatizing environment, and internal, an onslaught of uneasy run-on thoughts. Likewise, as suggested by Woolf in "Modern Fiction," rendering life is above all rendering its internal chaos, its confusion and intangibility in all its supposedly minor details, as if life and chaos were always ahead of well-being, and even of epiphany. Contrary to the novelists writing before modernism, Woolf and Plath endeavour to perceive life as it is in its full reality. Yet

as T. S. Eliot, another modernist writer, has the speaker put forth in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," it is not that simple: "It is impossible to say just what I mean" (Eliot qtd in Warren 110). In Plath's and Woolf's works, reality is effectively seen as multiple and dislocated, hence reflecting in a sort of hyper-realistic mimesis the various feelings and visions one constantly experiences in life. Identity is fleeting. A substantial oscillation occurs between the vision of wholeness as an absolute truth and of the self as a genuine psychological vision. Consider *The Waves*, which stages a six-sided personality. Is it Woolf's or a multifaceted vision of a true self? As suggested by Eric Warner, among other critics, this novel deals with a lot of perceptions and understandings which are so contradictory that they endanger the coherence and steadiness of the self. Plath bases her poem "Cut" on an onion-cooking scene, an everyday detail. The top of the narrator's thumb is cut, which opens onto queer fantasies about an Indian axing a pilgrim's scalp and a "trepanned veteran" (*SP* 10, 38). Out of a common scene, Plath makes a poem about life and perception, the latter coming from the self, and about death as companion to the solidity of life:

> The top quite gone
> Except for a sort of a hinge
>
> Of skin,
> A flap like a hat,
> Dead white.
>
> (3-7)

The comparison between the top of the thumb and the hat induces a weird vision, and the latter awakens a death sentiment. A sense of the absurdity of life contaminates the self, as it does in Woolf's *Between the Acts*, when Giles tramples a snake and toad to death, and blood splashes out. Life is no longer solid. The blood staining his clothes is

indicative of the nonsensical. As an absurdity, death becomes akin to the perception of life itself. Thus, Woolf suggests, acts are often useless, and there is a discrepancy between facts as a vector of dislocation and vision which is the provider of coherence. Dreaming is often inserted into factual reality as a means of handling dismantlement. For instance, in *The Waves*, the characters, except for Rhoda whose body remains fixed, "skim the flower-beds with their nets. They skim the butterflies from the nodding top of flowers" (7). This poetic act, full of sweetness and smoothness, is a way of reinventing reality in order to transform its most terrifying aspects into a reassuring vision. At another point, Louis assimilates himself to a "stalk": "I hold a stalk in my hand. I'm the stalk" (7)—as if there were a disjunction through the weird and unusual identification between a human being and a vegetable element. However, this thought is followed by a daydream about "grey flannels" (7) and fantasies about the desert and the Nile. As with Louis's dream vision, the author's vision is that which embraces, mending dislocated fragments. Thus, both vision and writing are providential acts to cohere the self.

The visions Plath presents are as profound as Woolf's. On the one hand, disjunction and chaos seem related to death. On the other, death and warped perceptions are companion pieces. By dint of metaphors and bold comparisons, a sense of disruption permeates her work. In *The Bell Jar*, purity violently contradicts impurity as the self needs to be sane and healthy to survive internal chaos. The most meaningful example is undoubtedly the hot bath episode. As opposed to the "wrinkled" and "used-up" self of the previous page, the hot bath provides unity: "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath"; "I felt myself growing pure again"; "I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water" (*BJ* 21). The verb "to feel" is powerful here. The sense of well-being when the narrator is in her hot bath can be seen as being in opposition to the distorted perception of the self of the page before. Both feelings destroy the stability of the narrator's vision of unity. Woolf and Plath both intermingle the factual with the

perceptive. Consider *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which one day is equivalent to one novel. The tiniest fact, the opening of a window, causes the heroine to feel life while, in the meantime, a flock of memories invades the conscious self so that the factual, the perceptive and the unconscious cohabit in the same sphere.

In Plath's "Ariel," personification—"The dew that flies/ Suicidal,"—is both a vision and a way of letting the self's anguish pervade natural elements (*SP* 28-29). Vision causes the self to interpret its environment. Feelings of disjunction permeate the self, both internally and externally. Through a mighty mimesis between the ego and nature, chaos is at the same time an internal and an external disorder. Not only is nature wrongly appropriated by the self but its unifying power is not sufficient either. In Plath's "Morning Song," nature is not binding enough to allow the self to cope with motherhood: "I'm no more your mother/ Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand" (7-9). There is a sense of chaos here. A disruption is created when the poetic imagery—the "moth-breath" of the speaker's baby and the "dull stars" the window panes swallow—does not prevent the narrator from having to "stumble from bed cow-heavy" (10, 15-16, 13). The self is distorted by daily life as much as by motherhood, though the latter is usually fulfilled in Plath's works. In "A Birthday Present," the speaker would rather kill herself than receive a present and her vision of "veils" (symbolizing death perhaps), of "shimmering curtains" (hidden things?) dissociates with the happy beginning when she is quietly cooking (16). A certain amount of humor, nonetheless, redeems the horrifying visions of the poem.

Woolf whirls selves asunder for no particular reason except to show how life cruelly unbalances their internal equilibrium. In *The Waves*, the characters are "alone" (6). In *Between the Acts*, they are together but "each of them fe[els] separately" (41). In *The Waves*, the genders are equally divided into two sets of three to form an equilibrated group. Yet, no one feels particularly at ease or strong enough to face life. The link Bernard, the storyteller, makes between all of the characters is un-

fortunately uneven and, in the end, sterile. In fact, as a six-sided personality, the self seems to be even more scattered than if it were only one, as the mirror relevantly illustrates. At one point in *Between the Acts*, Mrs. Giles Oliver watches her reflection in the looking-glass, which returns a sort a prism-sighted dimension of her self. The perception of one's image warps the truth and conveys a deconstructed image. The reflection of the looking-glass may be interpreted differently according to the point of view. In *Between the Acts*, the reflection provides "three separate versions," that is, three different points of view of what is reflected in the mirror (11). The body becomes monstrous, an object of exaggeration and distortion and of disjunction because of the faltering aspect of the separate versions. The mirror asks the dodgy questions "what is real," and "what is not?" Yet it also establishes a reality, if not a truth. The real reflection, the whole body, does match, however, the unbearable unsteadiness of the point of view, the separateness of the particulars of the body. At one stage in *The Waves*, the reflection cuts Jinny's head into two parts. The reflection is loathsome. Moreover, her vision is as real as the point of view of reality is personal and questionable. Except in case of hallucinations, how can one head be sliced into two parts if not, effectively, cut by a knife or an axe?

In "Paralytic," Plath's narrator echoes the vaporous and disconnected Rhoda from *The Waves:* "Dead egg, I lie/ Whole/ On a whole world I cannot touch" (*SP* 17-19). In parallel with the paralytic who is no more in relation with the world and cannot move ("dead egg"), Rhoda, the schizophrenic, remains in abeyance, cut off from her environment, only trying to imitate her friends in order to get a tiny grip on the world: "Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail" (*W* 41). Rhoda's fight with reality is permanent, as shown by her constant yearning for peace. Furthermore, Woolf's syntax reveals that Rhoda longs for a more peaceful world away from facts and suffering. As in Plath's poems or *The Bell Jar*, mirages and dreams are a solution to find unity, yet characters try to tie themselves to prosaic reality just because they have to. The reality of life is more concrete than vaporous.

Nonetheless, it is such a hard battle that they fail to finish and give up all arms. That is why, as if in answer, suicide is an option for Rhoda in *The Waves* or for Esther, the heroine of *The Bell Jar*, as it is for the authors, both of whom eventually embraced death to escape, at last, the horror of reality.

Often pondered is the connection between Woolf's and Plath's extraordinary creativity and poetry and their mental illnesses. Some biographers have even suggested that Woolf suffered from schizophrenia and Plath from bipolarity. This great sensitivity to feelings and emotions and to the complexity of one's self is most likely linked to their mental disorders, appearing on the page in deconstructed and discomposed imagery. Therefore, it seems that they allow their characters to experience strong internal adventures, as in *The Waves* where six people are cast into whirling life. Attempts to reach epiphany through feminine imagery and the evocation of natural elements (water, for example) suggest smoothened introspective thoughts. Nonetheless, both authors' writing is distorted and fragmented; very often, their sentences are truncated, cut short in the middle, and their characters are split (scattered selves). Therefore, death is almost never a negative end. It may even be seen as the ultimate attempt to bridge the gap between facts and vision or between the mighty masculine and the evanescent feminine. The characters' commentaries in Plath's *Ariel* poems or in Woolf's works are broken and dismantled, though a general authoritative vision can sometimes unify what is divided.

Woolf and Plath both resort to unifiers. In *The Bell Jar*, more superficial characters, such as Doreen, are foils to Esther's overwhelming ill-being. In *The Waves*, Neville and Bernard try to create sequences, ultimate moments of harmony, and gather together the group. Bernard, through his stories, serves as a meta-textual character; he and Neville weave threads throughout the novel. Woolf and Plath use rhythm to thread their pieces together. Repetition—"chuff, chuff, chuff" or "cut, cut, cut" in *Between the Acts*, for example—is a necessary element, often obeying a ternary rhythm. The gramophone acts like the waves, as

a machine marking the unrolling of events. Rhythm is undoubtedly a bond, yet it cannot smooth fragments. It is only a trace of the author's vision. Thematically, scraps remain.

The fragments in the texts, coupled with an awareness of Woolf's and Plath's mental illnesses, provide a helpful prosaic point of view. Bipolar or schizophrenic personalities lack mental and physical boundaries and entertain a difficult contact with reality. Intelligence and incomprehension of the world, moreover, are often paired.[1] That is perhaps why Woolf and Plath are drawn to death. In 1895, at age 13, Woolf coped with the death of her mother followed shortly by her half-sister Stella's death in 1897. What is more, after losing her father in 1904, Woolf faced her brother Thoby's death just two years after in 1906. Sylvia Plath lost her father in 1940 when she was eight years old. Although their lives can account for their uneasiness, their works reveal something beyond a trauma, a constitutional way of perceiving life. Thus, like Rhoda in *The Waves*, Plath and Woolf both attempted suicide a few times before succeeding. A careful reading of their work suggests that death was, for Plath and Woolf, more liberation than punishment or escape. If death is included in a vision of harmony, then there should be a parallel between death as the result of unified imagery and writing as the trace of the author's unifying and filtering vision. Death offers an epiphany. It mends Plath's and Woolf's fragments.

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Note

1. Eugene Minkowski, *La Schizophrénie* (Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 2002) 111-112. Tandis que l'instinct est moulé dans la forme même de la vie, l'intelligence est, au contraire, caractérisée par une incompréhension naturelle de celle-ci. L'intelligence, telle qu'elle sort des mains de la nature, a pour objet principal le solide inorganisé. Elle ne se représente clairement que le discontinu et l'immobilité. Elle n'est à son aise ainsi que dans la mort.

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The Fig Tree and the Black Patent Leather Shoes:
The Body and Its Representation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Nóra Séllei

Welcome to the desert of the real.

—Morpheus in *Matrix*

The Fig Tree

Sylvia Plath's only one—autobiographical—novel appeared in January 1963, just a few weeks before her suicide and has since become a cult book. Several critics have compared it to Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (Taubman qtd. in Ames 214; Bundtzen 111), claiming that *The Bell Jar* is its feminine version: it focuses on adolescence, on the issue of entering adulthood, on the various crises teenagers might encounter. Plath's novel, however, has become a cult book in a more tragic way: psychiatrists' and psychologists' vocabulary has been enriched by the term "the bell jar syndrome" as the novel triggered a wave of suicides among female university and college students suffering from the phenomenon called by Betty Friedan "the feminine mystique." The image of women in the 1950s and 1960s (the suburban wife rearing children in and for a society of affluence) stood in sharp contrast with the career options that opened up for an increasing number of women by their entrance into higher education—and there are even today a great number of young women suffering from the same psychic syndrome. The novel must have become a cult book also because Path actually made a suicide attempt in 1953 (the time when the plot takes place), and she "managed" to commit suicide ten years later, and her way of doing it has turned into a myth. As the story goes, after starting her life independent of her husband, Ted Hughes, she moved to London, into the house where W. B. Yeats used to live; here, she strug-

gled to create a balance between motherhood—two small children—and the desire to write. After a time she could no longer cope, so one morning, after preparing breakfast for her children, she carefully isolated the gaps on and around the kitchen door, and opened the gas oven.

It is this very pressure of choice between binaries, the impossibility of reconciliation, of compromise that seems to be at the centre not only of Plath's suicide but of *The Bell Jar* as well: its most emblematic—and most often quoted—allegory in the text is the fig tree:

> I saw my life branching out before me like a green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was the Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (62-63)

Basically, it is the pressure of choice—and most particularly, as clear from the enumeration, the choice between being a wife-and-mother and being a female creator—that leads to the protagonist Esther Greenwood's schizophrenia and psychic collapse. The most well-known symptoms of schizophrenia—passivity, depersonalisation, disembodiment, and feeling of fragmentation—however, as Elaine Showalter points out,

> have parallels in the social situation of women. [. . .] schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women's lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (213)

R. D. Laing, a theorist of this psychic disturbance, argues that the root and cause for the ontological insecurity behind schizophrenia is the basic existential experience of the self's alienation from the body, the experience that one's biological existence is not rooted in one's body. Part of this symptom is that such a person seems to "feel most closely associated with the 'mind'" (65-67). This description, or definition, is parallel with the situation Esther Greenwood—and Plath, and so many other women—get into: a problem caused by the social roles associated with the female body and/or by the notion of creativity, considered a male privilege. These two aspects come up in the text only as exclusive binaries in the case of women (examples are Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs. Willard, the embodiments of the feminine mystique on the one hand, whereas Jay Cee, the successful editor on the other hand, who appears only in terms of her work—and her body is designated as ugly), suggesting the impossibility of reconciliation, or any harmony between the female body and the creative mind.

Laing's argument, however, presupposes that there exists a feeling called embodiment, and in this case "the individual thus has as his starting-point an experience of his body as a base from which he can be a person with other human beings" (67). Furthermore, as opposed to the body "felt more as an object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's being," thus as "the core of the *false self*" (67), the embodied self is experienced as the core of one's being, which makes "creative relationships" possible, as opposed to "sterile relationships" (82). Laing, thus, considers feelings of embodiment crucial both in diagnosis and in treatment, and admittedly-unadmittedly the

body becomes the authentic location where the core of the healthy, "embodied" psyche should be sought for.

Thus, if we accept that Esther Greenwood can be interpreted as an example for the Laingian "divided self" (supported by the allegory of the fig tree and several other parts of the text in which the fragmentation and the depersonalisation of the "I" and of the body are evident: the first-person narrator refers to her own body parts and body functions in an absolutely objectified way), then it must be investigated into how the speaker of the text, the autobiographical narrator relates to her own and others' bodies and how she represents the body of the narrated "I." This is a crucial question because since the publication of Laing's study in 1960, the mode of speaking about the body has undergone basic changes (and, as Showalter argues, Laing's study was published at that time not by chance: it seems to diagnose the symptom of the age by identifying schizophrenia [210-11], and one can only add that this diagnosis is an ample parallel to the hysterisation of Victorian women). In spite of the changes in the discourse about the body, however, the interpretation of *The Bell Jar* has not undergone major revaluations: even Showalter approaches the text with the terms of Laingian psychology, without investigating the terms of "disembodiment/embodiment" in the light of more recent theories of the body (216-18).

Namely, Laing takes the body for granted: he considers it as something given and unproblematic; at no point of his text does he raise the issue that the "biological body" is the production of discourse as well—more exactly, the result of several discursive systems which, it the same time, comes about as the result of individual perception.[1] As opposed to this, the discursive concept of the body implies—as Jane M. Ussher sums it up—that one cannot speak about the "natural" body, rather, the body is created by sociocultural discourses and practices, and within this framework it is crucial to interpret the *representation* of the female body (4-5) since in M. Blumm's words—recalling and revising Simone de Beauvoir[2]—"one becomes a woman by the use of the

signs with which we write, speak and see" (qtd. in Ussher 5). If, however, the body is not a pre-existing entity, then both the body and its perception are indirect. Furthermore, this concept of the body questions the presupposition in Laing's theory that in the case of the "embodied self" there exists a direct relationship between the self and the body, and that only in the cases of schizophrenia is the self "never revealed directly in the individual's expressions and actions, nor does it experience anything spontaneously and immediately" (80). The discursive concept of the body precludes the "authentic" and "natural" body that can be the genuine "core" of the self, since in this concept the body emerges as the result of symbolic systems of signs, including social roles, and even sexuality as an adopted behavioural mode. Undoubtedly, as Showalter points out, Laing made a crucial step when he denied the organic cause of schizophrenia (and thus rejected ECT and lobotomy as valid treatments), but rather considered it of social origins, in which it is primarily family transactions and interactions that play the central role (221). In my view, however, the notion of the embodied self as the key to the healing process in the Laingian system (and in Showalter's interpretation) is still problematic once we accept the discursive concept of the body.

Taking all these points into consideration, my question is how the body, the female body, and, primarily, Esther Greenwood's body, are represented in the text of *The Bell Jar*, and whether these representations of the body support the notion of the body as the authentic core of the self, or quite the contrary: they can be read as the body as a semiotic sign. This question, on the other hand, leads on to the further problem whether healing is possible, since the moment the notion of the body as the core of the authentic self ceases to exist, the question arises how—to put it profanely—the divided, fragmented "I" can be reassembled on the basis of "genuine" embodiment.

In my opinion, the representation of the body in the text undergoes three phases that follow Esther Greenwood's condition, but neither the first, nor the third phase (that is, the starting or the closing point) im-

plies the image of the coherent, unified self, but rather implies images of the body, constantly changing and constructed by numerous discourses, systems of metaphors, and semantic fields. At the beginning of the text, the body image is "written" by various expectations (by fashion, women's magazines, the mother's ideal of the "pure female body," and by the projections of the image of "the intellectual woman"). This is followed by the body image that can be described by the Laingian notion of disembodiment, characterised by the total alienation of bodily functions, by the utter division between the speaking "I" and her body image. Healing and recovery, however, do not imply in my opinion the emergence of the "embodied self:" the body does not become the authentic core of the self, but—similarly to the beginning of the text—the body image in the third phase is created (once again) by discourses of "normality" and "madness," by the semantic field of the "fashionable young woman." This interpretation of the text makes the currently dominant allegorical and moral readings of the text rather problematic: in this approach the value judgements implying the binaries of good/evil, modern/old-fashioned, natural/artificial, or true/false seem to collapse.

The Bile Green Hat

The first pages of the text are clearly dominated by the representations of the body which are related to fashion and women's magazines, in which the body is always covered and clothing is emphatically present: "all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet" are contrasted with "all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college," and the latter ones dissolve into "nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue" (2), which seems to support the implication that it is primarily women with intellectual aspirations that get into schizophrenic states since they cannot reconcile their "masculine" aspirations with the "natural" female body and feminine roles. The representation of the body in the

text, however, is far from what can be called "natural": at the beginning there appears a *leitmotif*, the black patent leather shoes:

> I was supposed to be having the time of my life.
>
> I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and back patent leather pocketbook to match. And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on—drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice struck onto a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion—everybody would think I must be having a real whirl. (2)

This description can be considered in the light of Michel Foucault's essay investigating "The Subject and Power," where he makes the point that individuality is necessarily subjected to a series of special patterns, or to put it in another way, "we can see the state"—more precisely, the dissemination of power, the system of discourses—"as a modern matrix of individualization" (215) because power relations are not imposed on society but, rather,

> [p]ower relations are rooted in the system of social networks. [. . .] taking as point of departure the possibility of action upon the action of others (which is coextensive with every social relationship), multiple forms of individual disparity, of objectives, of the given application of power over ourselves or others, of, in varying degrees, partial or universal institutionalization, of more or less deliberate organization, one can define different forms of power. (224)

This sophisticated system of power relations unavoidably includes the formation, the "reading" and "writing" of the perception and the

representation of the body. In the excerpt quoted above, Esther, the first-person narrator, is situated in that multiple system of relations in which—as a result of the traditions of first-person, autobiographical writings—she, on the one hand, perceives an earlier "I" of herself, on the other hand, perceives this very earlier self form others' perspectives, partly by adopting that perspective (cf. Neuman 295). These two perspectives, however, are sharply contrasted as the repetition of the expression "I was supposed to be" indicates: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America [. . .]. Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself" (2). This double—split, schizophrenic—perspective, seeing her earlier, narrated self from her own, narratorial perspective and from that of the others, which, at the same time, is partly internalised by the narrator is typical of the representation of the body as well. In this structure, there is a system of multiple perspectives: that of the external observer ("everybody would think that I must be having a real whirl" [2]), the perspective of the earlier, narrated "I" who partially adopts this external perspective, and, at the same time, that of the narrator who considers critically the perspective of this narrated "I" and creates both an ambivalent attitude and an ironic distance to it ("I was supposed to be" [2]). From this multiple perspective, the black patent leather shoes with the accessories to match create an enviable image of her not only for the readers of this women's magazine, but temporarily for herself as well—a vision which, however, undergoes a gradual but radical change.

In this respect, one cannot discover any significant difference between the black leather accessories and the "several anonymous young men" because all these function as signs: the young men "with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion" are accessories as well, their anonymity and model-like posing objectify them: they become spectacles, quite as Esther does. All of them are written by cultural discourses; there is nothing in their representation that could be called "natural": ironically, "natural Americanness" turns

into an image, a construction in the context of the magazine which, at the same time, has the function to produce images of the same kind, which, in turn, will have an effect on the actions of others: the readers of the magazine will strive to create their own images along these lines. Let's not forget that the very same photographic image plays a significant role in the text again at the psychiatry department of the hospital, in the section where the women closest to recovery mean to regain their "normality" and "femininity" by copying and imitating the magazine images: the sign of their good condition is that "they were all fashionably dressed and carefully made up, and several of them married" (168). The magazine images, thus, are produced by power, but the moment they appear they themselves unavoidably become an element in power discourse, as a measurement of normality, as both a discursive fact and a discursive practice.

Enmeshed in today's all-embracing cult of beauty,[3] one is not surprised at this effect of women's magazines, in the US of the 50s, however, the image had just relatively recently gained power. As it has been pointed out, the first real change ensued in the 1920s and early 30s, when

> such arbiters of the beautiful as Vogue were shifting from portraits of society beauties to "how-to" articles and an image of "ready-to-wear" beauty. This new direction formulated beauty as the means to wealth and status rather than as the effect of wealth. The fashion magazines' mixture of "lives of the beautiful and famous" with self-help-to-beauty articles promised "the reader the possibility of beauty." (Lakoff and Scherr qtd. in Neuman 299)

This is the classical American Cinderella-plot, whose normative images, among others, reached a wide public since the 50s saw another development in the media: "*[i]mage as norm* was disseminated through the sophisticated visual language of a mass communication system unprecedented in history" (Macpherson 3). Back in 1950, Mary McCar-

thy saw this process very clearly and claimed "the post-war process [began] to define both citizenship and adolescence chiefly through consumption" (Macpherson 8) in which "[w]oman-as-consumer *produces* herself: this is the moment of self-commodification. Woman-as-desirable-commodity *sells* herself as date-bait: this is the moment of self-commercialization," as Macpherson adds (8).

Esther's image appearing in the magazine verges on self-commodification with the difference—and on this point I agree with Macpherson—that she develops a certain ironic distance from the magazine and its projected image, whereas the question of how much this distance helps her to preserve her integrity is another issue (cf. Macpherson 20). Or, to put it in another way, it is highly questionable how much she is capable of resisting power and various discourses of power, and if she is capable of turning into a subject from an object. Jay Cee, the renowned editor-in-chief, calls to her attention that "the girl who was here before [Esther] didn't bother with any of the fashion-show stuff. She went straight from this office on to *Time*" (26)—whereas Esther does go to fashion shows, but, ironically, not even *Time* as a job and a discursive place can necessarily be read as a guarantee of authentic existence. Fashion shows and women's magazines, nevertheless, make it obvious that what is usually "taken for granted" is not natural at all, quite the contrary: mythology and infused ideology—and in this respect, there is not much difference between the human body and the food served for consumption. Roland Barthes's analysis of the recipes of *Elle* could very well have been written about the recipes of the magazine *Ladies' Day* of the novel. As Barthes writes,

> Ornamentation proceeds in two contradictory ways, which we shall in a moment see dialectically reconciled: on the one hand, fleeing from nature thanks to a kind of frenzied baroque (sticking shrimps in a lemon, making a kitchen look pink, serving grapefruit hot), and, on the other hand, trying to reconstitute it through an incongruous artifice (strewing meringue mushrooms and holly leaves on a traditional log-shaped Christmas cake, replac-

ing the heads of crayfish around the sophisticated béchamel which hides their bodies). It is in fact the same pattern which one finds in the elaboration of petit-bourgeois trinkets (ashtrays in the shape of a saddle, lighters in the shape of a cigarette, terrines in the shape of a hare). (79)

He draws the conclusion that in the case of *Elle*,

> This ornamental cookery is indeed supported by wholly mythical economics. This is an openly dream-like cookery, as proved in fact by the photographs in *Elle*, which never show the dishes except from a high angle, as objects at once near and inaccessible [. . .]. It is, in the fullest meaning of the word, a cuisine advertisement, totally magical, especially when one remembers that this magazine is widely read in small-income groups. The latter, in fact, explains the former: it is because *Elle* is addressed to a genuinely working-class public that it is very careful not to take for granted that cooking must be economical. [. . .] The readers of *Elle* are entitled only to fiction [. . .]. (79-80)

This is the very logic of how *Ladies' Day* functions in the text—as if the image of the food were borrowed from Barthes[4]:

> I had a vision of the celestially white kitchens of *Ladies' Day* stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled claw meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise and the bland yellow pear cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess. (39)

Food, similarly to human bodies as represented in the magazine, does not function as a sign representing reality, but itself turns into reality, or, to go a step further, and to use Jean Baudrillard's expression, into "*[t]he desert of the real itself*" (1; emphasis original). This is the world of the "hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of

combinatory models in a hyperspace without an atmosphere" (2), and let's add, without any origins of/in the real. Simulacrum, thus, is "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say, of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double [. . .]. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself" (2).

In my view, this is how the *Ladies' Day* images—food or human bodies—of the text function: they bear no causal relation whatsoever on reality, reality does not serve as a point of reference, but the images themselves turn into (hyper)reality. Esther has nothing to do with the image of "Esther" (at the psychiatry she even denies this identification): the photo is transformed into a pure image, into its own simulacrum. The body images of the first few ages of the text suggest the same simulacrum-like effect: whether male or male bodies, in all the cases they are multiply mediated and defined by cultural practices, and appear as "covered" bodies. Detailed descriptions overcrowded with sophisticated adjectives and nouns to make distinctions are in abundance; their function, however, is not to make the readers visualise the characters in their physicality, but, on the basis of clothing as a semiotic system, to turn characters into an image[5]—into the reality and simulation of the simulacrum, into the desert of the real if you like.

All the interpreters of the text have compared Esther's two New York friends, Doreen and Betsy, who, at first sight, seem to be each other's counterpoints. Doreen's body is written—and can be read—as a 1950s sex symbol, describable in Susan Bordo's term as "the voluptuous female body [. . .], a coercive ideal in the fifties" (269):

> Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting powder. She smelled as strong as a whole perfume store. (6)

Her wardrobe, made up of pieces the materials of which follow the most recent fashion trends (lace, nylon, and silk), and paying attention to matching the most minute details ("pocketbook covers made out of the same material as [her] dresses" [4]) is apparently the opposite of the innocent-looking lack of artificiality of the other girls' clothes: the "starched summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or maybe the terrycloth robes that doubled as beachcoats" (4), and, particularly, the opposite of "Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail" (5), who looks innocence and naturalness embodied, who can impress even a TV producer with a story about male and female corn in Kansas (5). The naturalness of Betsy seems to be confirmed by the fact that this corn-story is unsuitable for any TV production: as if it implied that Betsy resists images of the mass media—but not even Betsy's identity can be attributed an unremovable core, signified by the Kansas corn fields. Ironically, it is Betsy who the Beauty Editor persuades to get her hair cut, and "*made a cover girl out of her*, and I still see her face now and then, smiling out of those 'P.Q.'s wife wears B. H. Wragge' ads" (5; emphasis added). Mistaken it is, thus, to contrast Doreen and Betsy as if one were artificiality embodied, whereas the other were innocence and naturalness embodied as both of them are transformed into images by the media; furthermore, Betsy, the cover girl, obtains a wide-ranging discursive power over the others.

In the same way as the "natural" body of Betsy's must be denied, one cannot attribute a natural body to Mrs. Willard either, who otherwise represents the pole opposite to the fashionable young women with a more liberated, "modern" sexuality. Mrs. Willard's emblem—in contrast to the clothes tight on the body—is her "brown figure in sensible flat brown shoes" (109) and "her heather-mixture tweeds" (178): suggesting naturalness, yet, these signs of naturalness, in the very matrix created by the binary opposition with the girls wearing sexy dresses and black patent leather shoes, turn into the signs and agents of another discourse: she is the mouthpiece of the *Christian Science Monitor*, propagating asexuality, virginity, and feminine passivity. Her

clothes are interpreted in this context, and, thus, become semiotic signs which, as a result, can be shifted over onto other signifieds as well: this is how Esther projects everything that Mrs Willard means onto another, unknown woman: "I thought what an awful woman that lady in the brown suit had been, and how she, whether she knew it or not, was responsible for my taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that happened after that" (110). In spite of this claim, no sign of the "good" can counterbalance the "bad"—all one can find is other kinds of coercive discourses and discursive practices, sometimes even going against each other, but they can never be arranged into neat binary oppositions along values like good/bad, or true/false.

In accordance with the logic of the simulacrum, the origins and the causality cannot be defined in the relation between the body and the representation of its signifier. The most conspicuous example of that is another scholarship girl in New York, Hilda, apprenticed to the Fashion Editor, and in her case, one cannot decide where she is situated in the discursive system of fashion. On the one hand, she herself is the creator of fashion by constantly preceding it by half a year; on the other hand, she is a close follower and skilful producer of whatever she sees at fashion shows, the all-purpose neckerchief, for example. In neither case can, however, the "original" be defined: neither that of "the all-purpose neckerchief out of mink tails and a gold chain you can get an exact copy of at Woolworth's for a dollar ninety eight" (23), nor that of the bile green hat coming into fashion half a year later, imitating a not yet existing "original"—called by Baudrillard the "precession of simulacra" (1). Hilda's "existence" is the existence of the simulacrum, that of the "as if" which has neither a basis for comparison, nor any origins:

> Hilda moved like a mannequin the whole way.
>
> "That's a lovely hat, did you make it?"
>
> I half expected Hilda to turn on me and say, "You sound sick," but she only extended and retracted her swanny neck.

"Yes."

The night before I'd seen a play where the heroine was possessed by a dybbuk, and when the dybbuk spoke from her mouth its voice sounded so cavernous and deep you couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. Well, Hilda's voice sounded just like the voice of that dybbuk.

She stared at her reflection in the glossed shop window as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist. (81-82)

The various meanings of the word "mannequin," by their conflation, play a clever game upon the reader who tries to interpret this passage. "Mannequin" has several layers of meanings: from its French origins, it still carries the connotations of the dwarf; a dated meaning is the fashion model displaying new kinds of clothes; whereas the most current use is the life-size dummy of the human body, used by tailors, shops, or doctors. In Hilda's case, all these meanings are conflated in a very intricate pattern: she walks like a fashion model, more exactly like a dummy who walks like a fashion model, who does not simulate anything or anybody, but herself turns into the real, into the hyperreal, or into the desert of the real. It comes as no surprise, then, that she wants to root her existence in the image reflected in the shopwindow: if one sees oneself in the shopwindow from the outside, one's figure appears inside, in the place of the dummy, that is, in the place of the simulacrum, and thus, as if a medical dummy, it represents its own visuality that lacks its origins in reality. Hilda can claim neither her voice (owned by the dybbuk), her neck (borrowed from a swan), nor her thoughts as her own: all she can say, without thinking, on the day of the execution of the Rosenbergs is:

"It's awful such people should be alive."

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding pace, "I am so glad they're going to die." (82)[6]

At this moment, Hilda appears dwarfed in her humanity since she becomes the mouthpiece of the dominant discourse of power, of cold war ideology. In Hilda's case, then, the body becomes a sign and the signifier of all those concepts that can "write" her, without any trace of the subject's resistance in her. "Hilda," as such, does not exist: she is a shopwindow dummy compiled out of various fragments and perspectives.

Hilda, thus, is an extreme example of how dresses, clothes, and trends in fashion function as signifiers that "write," create, bring about the body, more precisely the representation of the body, and turn it into cultural texts (even in the cases when apparently all that is at stake is who has got what kinds of bones or curves). In this matrix, even the apparently natural-looking pieces of clothes become cultural signifiers which, one would think, suit various individual personalities; in reality, however, everyone is subjected—in Foucault's terms—to "the simultaneous individualisation and totalisation of modern power structures" (216), which create various patterns and discourses, sometimes even opposing each other, but none is free of power relations and discursive practices.

This is why, on the way home, Esther is just as much alienated from Betsy's natural-looking "green dirndl skirt" and "white eyelet blouse [with] frills at the shoulder," for which she exchanges her only piece of clothes, "the bathrobe with the cornflowers on it" (92), after she scattered all her dresses into the wind during her last night in New York (91). She has no other reason for wearing Betsy's clothes for weeks afterwards but that she has nothing else to wear: and that no matter what she wears, dresses designate and signify her body—the only difference is the meaning, not the process of signification—whereas, at this point of the text, what Esther is aiming at is to avoid and resist the signifying practices of representation and write a "text" of her own (in both the literal and the abstract meanings of the word).

Technicolor and the Tabloid Press

Writing her own texts, however, bears a ghastly resemblance to the "technicolor" dishes of the women's magazine (21) and to a technicolor film she sees, and while in the cinema, she gets sick of the poisoned crabmeat made in, and for, the Food Testing Kitchens of *Ladies' Day* (21). Just to recall what a technicolor film is: technicolor as a method is in itself a simulacrum since it creates the impression of the colour film when the colour film does not exist; that is, in reality it precedes what it aims to simulate—like Hilda's bile-green hat the fashion—yet it turns real. In this instance, however, it is not only the technique of the film that creates the effect of "as if," lacking its point of reference, but the characters and the story as well: "It starred a nice blonde girl who looked like June Allyson but was really somebody else, and a sexy black-haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor but was also somebody else, and two big, broad-shouldered boneheads with names like Rick and Gil" (34), whereas the girls had "dresses like something out of *Gone With the Wind*" (34). It looks as if two living actresses and a real film served the basis for comparison, but it is obvious that both the two actresses and the film function as images, as parts of mythology in the Barthesian sense of the word, not as real beings and as an existing film, thus, one could much rather speak about "June Allyson," "Liz Taylor," or "dresses in *Gone With the Wind*." The process of mythologising these images, by which they are transformed into simulacra, is amply illustrated by the cover of the Hungarian translation of Barthes's *Mythologies*: it features Andy Warhol's picture *Liz as Cleopatra*. In the picture, however, it is undecidable who the "original" sex symbol is: Liz or Cleopatra, or Liz as Cleopatra; furthermore, Warhol multiplies the image in a way that each image is the simulation of all the others, and this multiplication, the production of further images, can be carried on infinitely (as, e.g., in the technicolor film of the text) because this reproduction has neither a point of origin nor an end. Plath's text, thus, by using the adjective "technicolor," creates a perfect link between the

dishes poisonous both in the abstract and the concrete sense of the word, as offered by the magazine, and the poisonous—in the text sickening—effect of the infinite multiplication of the images, which signifies the discursive power of culture. Furthermore, both the images of food and the images of these iconic women are related to the (female) body inasmuch as they shape them both from the inside and the outside, according to the preceding model, to the precession of simulacra. Elisabeth Bronfen sums up succinctly the essence of this model, using the metaphors of food consumption and the consumer society: "we are the signs we consume even while we are consumed by them" (*Plath* 125).

What Esther aims at, however, is avoiding prescribed signs: her sentence commenting on her studying chemistry—"the formulas made me dizzy" (3)—can be understood in a broader meaning, as the rejection of the models, formulae, and formulas of the acquisition of culture and the process of socialisation. Esther tries to write "herself": in the text one can see several versions of this "writing of her own," and a major question of the text seems to be if she, or anyone else, can avoid the formulas writing—among others—the body. I can but agree with the position that "[t]o Esther, there seems to be no reality left which is not already a reproduced image or simulacrum, packaged and fetishised" (Britzolakis 35). When she starts writing her novel—that is, instead of acting out pre-existing scripts she engages in a creative act—the narrator makes the following comments: "only I had the dim impression I'd probably read it somewhere else a long time ago" (99). And the text reproduces this other text of unknown origins that can neither be replaced nor continued:

> From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway, surrounded by two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box hedge, small as a doll in a doll's house. [. . .]
> *Elaine sat on the breezeway in an old yellow nightgown of her mother's waiting for something to happen*. [. . .]

> I sat like that for about an hour, trying to think what would come next, and in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother's old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well. (98-99)

It can be added that the narrator, watching, from a distance of about ten years, Esther watching herself writing a novel about "herself" in the way that at one point the novel about herself gains precedence, also contributes to the infinite multiplication of this image. This excerpt, at the same time, reveals that not only fashionable bodies have their preceding models (in spite of the fact that one is inclined to dismiss images of fashionable pop culture as outer-directed), but one has to admit that even bodies and body images outside the discourse of fashion take their origins in the repertoire of culturally produced images.

We are similarly inclined to consider suicide as an autonomous act like creation. The most emphatically prescribed "script" of the text, however, is that of Esther's suicide. Bronfen also argues that

> [t]he fact that this first suicide narrative available to Esther should be that of the cliché images of news reporting is yet another example for the duplicitous way in which Plath's heroine is positioned within her cultural image repertoire. Implicitly Esther's suicide fantasies feed of such conventional images even as her novel about her suicide attempt also tries to convey the realness of this desire. (*Dead Body* 411)

Esther's suicide fantasies are emphatically inspired by the headlines and the photos of the tabloid press, thus all her related ideas appear in the form of visual images. The versions of suicide apparent offer the freedom of choice, nevertheless, the newspaper images—and, even more, the newspaper clippings that function quite like the cover pages featuring sex symbols, cut out by, and put out on the walls of, teenagers—turn into images and simulacra. Esther wants to read, and to relate to herself, these images, watching the suicidal man:

I felt he had something important to tell me, and whatever it was might just be written on his face.

But the smudgy crags of George Pollucci's features melted away as I peered at them, and resolved themselves into a regular pattern of dark and light and medium-gray dots.

The inky-black newspaper paragraph didn't tell me why Mr. Pollucci was on the ledge, or what Sgt. Kilmartin did to him when he finally got him in through the window. (111-12)

The image, thus, remains just an image, and if Esther wants to better examine and interpret it, it ceases to exist as a face, and cannot be interpreted beyond the matrix of making images out of various shades of grey. The disappearance of reality and referentiality is indicated by the lack of metonymic devices: there is neither space, time, nor causality; reality discontinues to serve as the point of reference. The cessation of the causality between reality and image, however, makes a reversed logic possible: the sign, or signifier, can relate to any other signified; this is why Esther can identify her own image with that of the actress in coma (with the only difference of the eyes that are open/closed). According to the logic of the simulacrum, everything is reversible: "[t]hat discourse 'circulates' is to be taken literally: that is, no longer goes from one point to another, but it traverses a cycle that *without distinction* includes the positions of transmitter and receiver, now unlocatable as such" (Baudrillard 41). Baudrillard also claims that

[t]he media and the official *news service* are only there to maintain the illusion of actuality, of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of the facts. [. . .] all "newsreel" footage thus gives the sinister impression of kitsch, of retro and porno at the same time [. . .]. Simulation is the master, and we only have a right to the retro, to the phantom, to the parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials. (38-39)

Nor does Esther have any other means at her disposal since the images of her "own" suicide function in the same way: Joan wants to commit suicide seeing—and clipping—the "story" and images of Esther's suicide attempt, whereas, ironically, but in perfect harmony with the logic of the simulacrum, even Esther learns her "own" story from these newspaper clippings (160-64), and, as a result, her suicide attempt cannot be considered as an authentic act. This is the reason why I disagree with Bronfen's interpretations that read Esther's suicide scenarios as a parody (*Plath* 119) or as subversive acts (*Dead Body* 409). In my view, Esther's "retro" cannot leave the dominant discursive framework, and she is incapable of even creating a subversive position within the hegemonic discourse—she can only replay the prescribed scenario. In her suicide fantasies, thus, it is inevitable for her to stage, to direct, and to equip herself with the proper amount and kind of props and costumes: with the belt of her mother's yellow bathrobe, the black patent leather shoes left as a sign on the beach, Betsy's green dirndl and white blouse accompanied by the black raincoat. These pieces of clothes are not only recurrent motifs of Esther's suicide fantasies, but they are the leitmotifs of the text of *The Bell Jar* as well, a feature which emphasises the system of connections between the various levels of fictionality and visualisation, a part of which is Esther's comment: "If I looked in the mirror while I did it [cut the wrists], it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play" (121). With this, the cycle of simulation is closed; what ensues is "the implosion of meaning," where "nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other [. . .]. *That is where simulation begins*" (Baudrillard 31), and, in Esther's case, all the connections are lost between the "I" and the image of the body.

The Sick Indian

The separation of the body, the body image, and the "I"—according to both the narrator and the logic of the simulacrum—makes even suicide impossible: "[i]t was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at" (121). This split, thus, ensues not only from the inevitable and exclusive choice from various role models (as the text is usually interpreted), but also—as we have seen—from the precession of simulacra. Esther has two "answers," responses—to return to Laing's terminology—to the cessation of the "real": in one version, she totally alienates her body image, whereas in the other one, she dislocates her body image from the dominant discourse and replaces it by marginalised—culturally "alien"—images as opposed to the discursive power of the magazines, the mothers, *Readers' Digest*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the tabloid press.[7]

There are an infinite number of examples for alienating the body in the text. In these instances, the narrator, the body of the narrated "I," and the clothes metaphorically indicating her body are separated: in a bar in New York she "felt melting into the shadows like the negative of a person [she] had never seen in [her] life before" (8). Her comment on her own response to Jay Cee's query on what her plans are for the future is "'I don't really know,' *I heard myself say*" (27; emphasis added); what is more, she is shocked to acknowledge—as opposed to her previous decisiveness, self-assertiveness, and self-confidence—that what she says is true: "It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognize some nondescript person that's been hanging around your door for ages" (27). This is a new "identity" for her, defined by the metaphor of a body lacking any attribute. As a last phase, her body falls into pieces when she gets sick after consuming both the technicolor food and film, accompanied by a further split of the body and the mind: whereas after vomiting she "felt purged and holy and ready for a new life" (39), the image of the physical body is fragmented: "the next thing I had a view of was somebody's shoe. [. . .] A little to the left of

the shoe I saw a vague heap of blue cornflowers on a white ground and this made me want to cry. It was the sleeve of my own bathrobe I was looking at, and my left hand lay pale as a cod at the end of it" (37); walking along with the misogynous Marco, her body parts become lifeless objects: "I put one foot in front of the other" (86), and she does not participate in what happens to her: "I am an observer" (86).

An aspect of the disintegration of the body is the process of how she is alienated from her clothes, in several phases. First, it is Doreen who pushes under the bed Esther's expensive—and dirty—clothes that "write" her in New York, and the sight of which Esther is incapable to bear (85); later, Esther feeds them to the New York night wind from her hotel room (91); and, finally, at the psychiatric hospital, even the sense of correlation between the "I" and the clothes ceases to exist, the relation becomes haphazard and random: "I noticed a pile of clothes on a chair beside the nurse. They were the same clothes the nurse in the first hospital had been packing into the patent leather case when I broke the mirror. The nurses began sticking the labels onto the clothes" (154).

Apart from pre-emptying, and disintegration, the other version of the alienation of the objectified and fragmented body image—as mentioned above—is a body image resisting dominant formulas when the self image presents a marginalised body, shifted to the periphery by some discourse of othering: "I looked yellow as a Chinaman" (6). These "othered"—alienated—body images are objectified as a result of what Foucault calls "[. . .] 'dividing practices.' The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. The process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys'" (208). Plath's implied binary oppositions, representing in an almost textbook-like manner the result of the Foucauldian dividing practices, utilise images of otherness and cultural deviance to express the alienation of the body: "I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed *Chinese* woman staring *idiotically* into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used up I looked" (15); "The face in the mirror looked like *a sick Indian*" (92);

"The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of *a prison cell* after a prolonged beating. It looked *bruised and puffy* and all the wrong colors. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance" (84; all emphases added).

The objectivization of the body image that comes about as a result of "dividing practices"—as the last quote testifies—correlates the total disintegration and the alienation of the body. The last phase of this process is when she does not even recognise herself in the mirror after her suicide attempt:

> You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-colored sore at either corner.
>
> The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors.
>
> I smiled.
>
> The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin. (142-43)

The alienated, sick, and totally disintegrated and unrecognisable body signifies the phase when Esther's collapse reaches its nadir: when she is referred to the hospital. As opposed to the illusory and simulacra-like body images of New York, which, yet, maintained a unified wholeness as a result of the discursive practices, this disintegrated body and these body images could be considered as the location to resist and subvert the dominant discourses as once we accept the notion of power in Foucault's sense of the word, according to which "at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight" (225). Follow-

ing Foucault's lines, while introducing the notion of gender, Teresa de Lauretis also argues that "the movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of the discourses [of systems of masculine representation . . .] is the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy" (26).

Undoubtedly, Esther's bodily and mental disintegration is a response to symbolic, discursive systems, thus could well be interpreted as "escape," "flight," or "the space-off," and—by denying the body image created by the dominant discourse—it could also be regarded a subversive act, the laugh of the Medusa as Cixous understands it (cf. Cixous). In *The Bell Jar*, however, this subversion is close to impossible to discover, for which one reason may be that, although in the text the body plays a central role, not in a single instance does the body become the source of subversive discourse, or, put in another way, never does it turn into a transformative representational practice: not even her wilful act of losing her virginity, opposing the maternal and Mrs. Willard-type principles, even if critics usually read it as a subversive act of escape and flight (see, e.g. Caminero-Santangelo 30).

Undeniably, one of the most often quoted sentences of the text, suggesting recovery and breaking out, comments on obtaining the contraceptive device that is equal to sexual freedom: "I was my own woman" (182), which indicates a control over her own life. The significance of this statement cannot be doubted because the fear of the pregnant woman and pregnancy is a leitmotif (the image of Dodo Conway with her six children, or the woman giving birth, the comment that Esther would go mad if all day she had to fulfill the wishes of children). In my view, however, it is an exaggeration to identify the freedom granted via contraception with bodily pleasures, with a body language of pleasure, with the subversion of, and resistance to (masculine) representational systems—with the laugh of the Medusa, if you like. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's body is written by patriarchal cultural discourses even at the moment of losing her virginity, quite similarly to the first kiss of her life

("it had been a dry, uninspiring little kiss" [50]): lacking (female) sexuality, eroticism, and desire. She chooses Irwin rationally, and according to the most traditional standards:

> I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect him. Irwin was a full professor at twenty-six and had the pale, hairless skin of a boy genius. I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it, and Irwin's ladies reassured me on this head. Then, to be on the safe side, I wanted somebody I didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing—a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites. (186)

This means that a man should be intelligent, and of a certain social prestige; he should have experience and should lead—by his anointed and transcendental power—the initiation rite. The result of the intercourse, from this perspective, could also be read ironically, as "due" punishment, by recalling the worst tradition of sexual initiation: pain, extreme bleeding, verging on death. This tradition is present not only at the level of bodily pain: defloration is seen by Esther via culture, and from the first moment on, she considers it as a potential object for meditation: "I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition. [. . .] I wanted to brood over my new condition in perfect peace" (187); and later on, even more concrete cultural layers come to the surface: "I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth" (189). And as if to illustrate the basic identity of Victorian and twentieth-century (patriarchal) cultures, the blood "ooz[es], stuckily into each black patent leather shoe" (188), into the shoes without which, as Esther claims, "I always feel lousy" (160). These shoes, nevertheless, or perhaps for this very reason, contribute to writing her body at each crucial point of the text, and thus function as a cultural code like the blood oozing down her legs. In this cultural context, losing her virginity can hardly be interpreted as a subversive act. Similarly, on the basis of the symbolic layers of the text, I can seriously

doubt those statements of Esther's that claim her genuine freedom ("I was perfectly free" [198]), or the interpretations that read defloration as "the possibility of sexual experience, and freedom" (Wagner-Martin 44). In the text, Esther does not gain her female and sexual body as the authentic site of the "I": her body is the site of body politics even in this instance, and her sexuality is always textualised, written by cultural texts and scripts.

The Madwoman

Esther's body does not laugh, subversively, as Cixous's Medusa: neither does it laugh when losing her virginity no matter how much she seems to be in control of it; nor does it laugh during her flight into her schizophrenia with its concomitant signs of mental and physical collapse, and fragmentation (in Laing's term, disembodiment)—into madness, frequently interpreted by feminist critics as subversion. The debate about the subversive potential of madness has been going on since the publication of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Jane Eyre* interpretation (336-71), and the French feminist theoreticians' like Cixous's or Irigaray's essays.[8] This debate, at the same time, contributed to the clarification of the question how dominant discourse can be resisted. Shoshana Felman draws the following conclusion:

> If, in our culture, the woman is by definition associated with madness, her problem is how to break out of this (cultural) imposition of madness *without* taking up the critical and therapeutic positions of reason: how to avoid speaking both as *mad* and *not mad*. The challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to "re-invent" language, to *re-learn how to speak*: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning. An old saying would thereby be given new life: today more than ever, changing our minds—changing the mind—is a woman's prerogative. (152-53)

The background to this summary is provided by two extreme poles: one claims that "the madwoman can't speak," because madness "is characterized by the (dis)ability to produce meaning—that is, to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society" (Caminero-Santangelo 11); the other side, however, claims that madness can be one of those marginalised modes of "speech" that can become subversive by the utter denial of phallogocentric symbolic systems. Felman's conclusion can also be linked to what Foucault considers the inevitable attribute of the subject, resistance, and interaction with power, and Felman goes a step further by providing a concrete example in the form of a new mode of speech, and a new mode of thinking.

In Esther's case, one can ask the question what role the body plays in her madness—and, particularly, in her "recovery"—if and how the body, the body image, or the perception of the body changes because (as seen above) one of the major causes of the schizophrenic split is the cultural inscription of the body; thus, a changed *body image* can refer to a changed *mode of speech and thinking*. Furthermore, one can investigate the reverse side of this question: how Esther is being cured, what are the implications of these treatments, or if Esther subjects herself to them; whether it is possible to bring about an alternative mode of symbolic representation on the basis of these treatments, or if Esther manages to create one.

As seen above, Esther collapses primarily for sociocultural, discursive reasons which, at the same time, "write" her body. Considering Esther's treatment ("reassembling" her body and body image, the recreation of the "embodied" self), however, the conclusion can be drawn that the way Esther's madness is treated is aimed at her physique, not directly at her mental state: the treatment bears no traces of sociocultural healing. Even Esther makes an ironic comment: "after all, I had been 'analysed'" (199). The ironic inverted commas are not there by chance: whenever the text is concerned with the "treatment," it is always related to physical therapy. In my view, however, ironically, these physical treatments have their discursive results because "recov-

ery" means not only recovering a healthy physical condition (and, of course, even the notion of "health" is the result of discourse), but the discursive normalisation of Esther's body, which, in turn, is identical with conferring on Esther the very same body image that made her a "mental" patient in the first instance. The binarity of body and mind, so characteristic of Western culture, collapses here; it functions in neither direction: no matter how much Esther would prefer to have something the matter with her body instead of her head (149), it is primarily her "head" that needs treatment; yet what *is* treated is the body—and, as one more switch, the bodily treatment is inseparable from the head because the self-image cannot be distinguished from culture.

Esther is given two kinds of physical treatment in the institute: insulin shock and ECT (but one of the patients even undergoes lobotomy). Elaine Showalter analyses these therapeutic methods from the 1930s to the 1950s from the perspective of gender and femininity. In her description, "schizophrenic patients were given injection of insulin to reduce their blood-sugar level and to induce hypoglycemic shock, which produced convulsions or a coma." As a side effect, patients gained twenty to sixty pounds, "parallel to the pseudopregnancy of the rest cure," and the mode of treatment "suggested surrogate mothering [. . .] and infantile regression." Electroconvulsive therapy, on the other hand, leads to "short-term or partial amnesias. [. . .] women to this day outnumber men as ECT patients [. . .] because they 'are judged to have less need of their brains.' [. . .] housewives can be seen as excellent candidates," particularly because they will be more manageable and obedient as a result. The Portuguese neurosurgeon who developed the method of lobotomy (and was granted the Nobel Prize in 1949 for it) "believed he had discovered a treatment of revolutionary potential for the management of schizophrenics, alcoholics, homosexuals, and even political dissidents" (205-06).

At this point, the first sentence of the novel becomes clear for the whole of the text: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in

New York" (1)—this is where Esther's own "political dissidence," her insulin shock, her ECT, and the politics of the body are conflated. Although she is not subjected to lobotomy, she is all through accompanied by it as a potential threat in the form of Valerie as, from the perspective of the patients, there is no rational reason for the treatments they get, and for their referral into various sections of the institute. Lobotomy is, at the same time, a stigma: an irreparable scar is left behind, with which Valerie boasts to Esther, quite as Joan puts on display the cuts on her wrist: lobotomy and the suicide attempt as signs signifying—and rendering meaning—to the body are shifted into one, and so do their meaning.

Whereas Esther escapes lobotomy, she undergoes several ECTs when she does not "improve"; that is, when she is incapable to fit in either her mother's suburban existence or the section of the most improved patients in the hospital. Electroshock, even in common visual representations, but in the novel as well, is associated with electrocution (and with Esther's scholarship in New York): "It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. New York was bad enough" (1). Another passage goes a step further and creates a relationship between ECT, death, and another model, different from New York—motherhood, which also wants to write Esther's body: after the first ECT at Dr. Gordon's, Esther is taken home in Dodo Conway's hearse-like station wagon, where she feels "dumb and subdued" sitting between her own mother and Dodo, pregnant with her seventh child (119). She is subjected to the second electroshock by Dr. Nolan (who is often interpreted as a positive, liberating surrogate mother to Esther), whereas her only reason to choose this therapy is that Esther is unwilling to fit in and conform to Belsize standards, the section of the institute where women make up their face, read women's magazines, and are "properly" dressed. In this way, electroshock, death, motherhood, and the New York image of women are permutated infinitely: all of them are inevitable, and they are

causes of each other in a way that the ultimate cause and the ultimate effect cannot be defined or distinguished from each other.

The institute treatment Esther receives, and is most spectacularly aimed at her body, is the insulin treatment: the text displays all the elements that signify femininity and the feminine body as spectacle, and the infantilisation implied in the cure. At the beginning, Esther experiences her body "skinny as a boy and barely rippled" (6)—and obviously deviant in its nonconformity to the ideal of the age—who loves eating yet never puts on weight (20). When she mentally collapses, she cannot eat and puts on weight only as a result of the insulin cure—still, as if a sign of resistance to the cure, it takes her a long time to get an insulin shock. Ironically, no matter how much she resists it, she is transformed, if not by the effect aimed at, but by the side effect: her body keeps putting on weight:

> But I never seemed to get any reaction. I just grew fatter and fatter. Already I filled the new, too-big clothes my mother had bought, and when I peered down at my plump stomach and my broad hips I thought it was a good thing Mrs. Guinea hadn't seen me like this, because I looked just as if I were going to have a baby. (157)

In addition, after the reaction, "Mrs. Bannister held the cup to my lips, I fanned the hot milk out on my tongue as it went down, tasting it luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother" (164). Consequently, at the institute she becomes what she flees from: on the one hand, she assumes the image of the fertile and pregnant woman she otherwise rejects, with all the culturally inscribed connotations of body fat; on the other hand, in this context regression into childhood evokes exposure, dependency, and obedience since the milk Esther gets is her reward for being a "good girl," her body obeyed, and produced a reaction.

In this respect, the insulin shock "curing" schizophrenics does not differ widely from the rest cure, which so infamously failed to cure hysterics, and not by coincidence. Both of them imply femininity and

the female body as "natural," whereas both are sociocultural notions: forced "fattening," feeding, obedience to nurses, total passivity, deprivation of any physical movement, and, at a more abstract level, the question of autonomy and dependency (on the rest cure, see Bassuk 139-47). Of all these, as we know, fat is a feminist issue, inherently belonging to the politics of the female body: anorectics, who reject their femininity—and at this point Esther can be considered an anorectic—want to regain "all the spiritual attributes of divine masculine youth" as opposed to the mother and the mother's body (Caskey 185). A major factor contributing to this syndrome, nevertheless, as several critics have pointed out, is what can be seen in Esther's case: anorectics in general have intellectual aspirations and abilities (cf. Boskind-Lodahl 343, Caskey 182), with far too many choices and the fear that they would not make the right choice (Caskey 177); furthermore, they "search for autonomy, independence, and spiritual growth" (189). Experts also emphasise that anorexia is a visual—i.e., perceptual—distortion, a "thought disorder" (181): the bony anorectic is obsessed with getting rid of her non-existing fat that as a spectacle could be interpreted as a sign of her femininity. Consequently, the anorectic body is also related to spectacle—the non-spectacle of the "feminine" body: an escape from the power of the body constructed discursively as feminine. In mental hospitals and in the text of *The Bell Jar*, however, there is no escape: female bodies are exposed to scrutinising and normalising male gazes (see, e.g., 153, 161); they become the objects of male gazes quite like "outside."

Bodies and Dummies

In spite of the apparent dividing line between the world of the institution and the institutional world, the outside and the inside are not separated—similarly to the confluence of the body and the body image. Esther's body, after the analysis, shows the very same, homogeneous, unified, seamless, absolutely "normal" body without any splits

or gaps—the kind of body which caused her mental collapse: "My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked but polished, and my red suit flamboyant as my plans" (199). Should anyone mistake it for an "innocent" description of the physical body, she adds the saying that has been defining the bridal dress for ages: "Something old, something new . . ." (199). Yet, as if still avoiding the hegemonic plot, she adds: "But I wasn't getting married" (199), but the narrator-Esther drops a remark suggesting that she got married, or at least gave birth to a child.

Has she recovered, then? Yes, she has, inasmuch as the doctors restored the body that can be read as feminine and unified needed for life outside. But what makes the difference between the outside and the inside? Esther herself poses the question: "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (194). Nor can Dr. Gordon's institute be distinguished from the world "outside":

> What bothered me was that everything about the house seemed normal, although I knew it must be chock-full of crazy people. [. . .]
>
> I paused in the doorway of the living room.
>
> For a minute I thought it was the replica of a lounge in a guest house I visited once on an island off the coast of Maine. (115)

Similarly, nor can the preconceptualised—prejudiced—cultural reading of the body be avoided either inside or outside. Esther contemplates upon "the asylum librarian, an alumna of the asylum herself. Glancing at her—myopic, spinsterish, effaced—I wondered how she knew she had graduated at all, and, unlike her clients, was whole and well" (199). The librarian, with her undefinably in-between position between inside and outside, normality and madness could—in de Lauretis's term—signify the heteronomous, marginal place that remains outside the borders of the masculine modes of representation.

The librarian's body, however, is not transformed into a place of resistance for the subject: she is the object of Esther's gaze and patriarchal perspective—similarly to how Esther looks at herself from the perspective of the doctors' committee. As a result of the discursive systems and dividing social practices, in this text Esther cannot escape objectifying gazes either inside or outside, whereas the objectification of the bodies, at the level of metaphors, evokes lifelessness, death—in the case of both the gazer and the body gazed at since neither gazing nor being gazed at is "innocent" or free from sociocultural codes. It is the ideological and power discourses that result in these bodies and body, which, in turn, become the transmitters and producers of ideology. All that is missing is the place of resistance in this "matrix." A sign of their objectification is that even on the committee we have Miss Huey—with her "cadaverous face" (199), whereas "cadavers [are] so unhuman-looking" as Esther remarks once—and only "eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks" (200), lacking individuality or identity. No matter where the bodies are, either "inside, or "outside," either "sane" or "insane," they are just lifeless, motionless dolls and mannequins: one night in New York, "[t]he faces were empty as plates, and nobody seemed to be breathing" (86); or when Esther is taken a photo of with the rose representing her plans and desires, it is not Esther's body that speaks; rather, it is being spoken: "At last, obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist's *dummy*, my own mouth started to quirk up" (83; emphasis added); and in Dr. Gordon's institute Esther describes what she sees:

> Then I realized that none of the people were moving.
>
> I focused more closely, trying to pry some clue from their stiff postures. I made out men and women, and boys and girls who must be as young as I, but there was a uniformity to their faces, as if they had lain for a long time on a shelf [. . .].
>
> Then my gaze slid over the people to the blaze of green beyond the diaphanous curtains, and I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enor-

mous department store. The figures around me weren't people, but *shop dummies*, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life. (116; emphasis added)

This metaphor of the (shop) dummies ultimately conflates the outside and the inside: it is not only the insane people who are lifeless (shop) dummies, but so is Hilda, who represents the simulacrum of the outside in its most crystallised form, who has to grasp and stick to her mirror image in the shopwindow—that of the psychiatric institute, perhaps?—so that she can make sure "she continued to exist" (102). At this point, the question should be posed once again: who is whose model, who is the model and what is reality, and whether in the infinite permutation of the images of the (dead) bodies and (shop) dummies there is any heteronomous place for the subject's resistance. Or the matrix, the desert of the real, is the only reality.

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Notes

1. Here, the irony is that the Laingian system itself implies the possibility of the body as the result of individual perception since the very central terms—embodiment/disembodiment—signal that the biological body as such cannot be taken for granted.

2. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295).

3. This phenomenon of contemporary culture is analysed by, among others, Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (see Works Cited).

4. I am most intrigued by the question if Plath was familiar with Barthes's analysis: *Mythologies* was published in French in 1961, so, theoretically, Plath could have had access to it, but I have not found any proof of that.

5. Without aiming at any totality, in the analysis the interpretation will be focussed on female characters because their images obviously contribute to Esther's sense of losing her self to a greater extent than those of men, but I mean to call attention to how detailed even male characters' clothing and appearance are in the text—and how they are turned into images (see the television producer Lenny's description, that of the anonymous man designed to be Esther's occasional sexual partner, of Buddy Willard,

or that of the misogynist Marco [5, 6, 9, 46, 47, 86]). The objectification and transformation of male characters into spectacles is all the more intriguing as spectacles and spectacularity are usually associated rather with femininity, but the very similarity between these descriptions and those of the female characters seems to support the claim that the male body is a sign as well, in the same way as the female body is.

6. Pat Macpherson analyses the text in detail in the context of the Rosenbergs and the cold war in general (6-40).

7. Jacqueline Rose has collected the allusions of the text both to high and popular culture, and calls our attention to the astonishing number of cultural references (184-88).

8. A lucid presentation of the issue is available in Shoshana Felman's essay, and in Marta Caminero-Santangelo's introduction to her monograph (see Works Cited).

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RESOURCES

Chronology of Sylvia Plath's Life

1932	On October 27, Sylvia Plath is born to Aurelia Schober Plath, a first-generation American of Austrian descent, age twenty-five, and Otto Emile Plath, an emigré from Grabow, Germany, age forty-six.
1935	On April 27, Plath's brother, Warren Joseph Plath, is born.
1936	The Plath family moves to Winthrop, Massachusetts.
1938	Sylvia begins public school at Winthrop and receives all As.
1940	On November 5, Otto Plath dies of pneumonia and complications from diabetes.
1940-1941	Aurelia Plath teaches secretarial studies at Boston University.
1942	Aurelia Plath moves her family, with her parents, to Wellesley, Massachusetts; Sylvia Plath starts at the Marshall Perrin Grammar School.
1944	Plath enters Alice L. Phillips Junior High School.
1947	Plath starts at Bradford High School. She makes friends with Phil McCurdy and dates John Pollard and Perry Norton. She wins Honorable Mention in the National Scholastic Literary Contest.
1950	Plath enters Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, on a scholarship
1952	Plath wins *Mademoiselle* magazine's fiction contest.
1953	In the summer, Plath is guest editor at *Mademoiselle* in New York City, where she is afflicted by depression. When she returns to Massachusetts, her depression deepens; she is treated with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) as an outpatient. She attempts suicide in August by taking sleeping pills, is found and taken to Massachusetts General Hospital. After a brief stay in the hospital's psychiatric wing, she is taken to McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, where she is treated by Dr. Ruth Beuscher with insulin, ECT, and other therapies.

1954	In February, Plath returns to Smith.
1955	Plath graduates summa cum laude from Smith and goes to Cambridge, England, on a Fulbright scholarship.
1956	Plath meets Ted Hughes in February and marries him on June 16 (Bloomsday).
1957	During Plath's second Cambridge year, she completes her degree.
1957-1958	Plath returns to America with Hughes and takes a position as instructor in English at Smith College.
1958-1959	Plath takes part-time jobs in Boston after quitting her Smith position. She also visits Robert Lowell's poetry seminar and befriends Anne Sexton.
1959	In the fall, Plath writes at Yaddo, an artists' community in Saratoga Springs, New York. In the winter, she and Hughes return to England.
1960	On April 1, Plath's first child, Frieda Rebecca, is born at home in London. Plath's first poetry collection, *The Colossus, and Other Poems*, is published in England in October.
1961	Plath suffers a miscarriage and has an appendectomy; she and her family move to Devon, England. Plath receives a Eugene F. Saxon fellowship to work on her novel *The Bell Jar*, which she completes within the year.
1962	On January 17, Plath's son, Nicholas Farrar Hughes, is born. *The Colossus* is published in the United States. Plath learns of Hughes's infidelity, and the couple separate; Plath writes approximately thirty poems right afer their separation. In December, Plath and her two children move to London, to an apartment where William Butler Yeats once lived.
1963	In January, *The Bell Jar* is published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas to generally favorable reviews, only a few of which would have reached Plath before her death. On February 11, Plath commits suicide in her London flat by turning on the gas jets.

1965	*Ariel* is published in the United Kingdom, edited by Ted Hughes.
1966	*Ariel* is published in the United States. *The Bell Jar* is republished in the United Kingdom under Plath's name
1971	*The Bell Jar* is published in the United States under Plath's name.

Works by Sylvia Plath

Long Fiction
The Bell Jar, 1963

Short Fiction
Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, 1977-1979

Poetry
The Colossus, and Other Poems, 1960
Three Women, 1962
Ariel, 1965 (revised as *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, 2004)
Uncollected Poems, 1965
Crossing the Water, 1971
Crystal Gazer, 1971
Fiesta Melons, 1971
Lyonesse, 1971
Winter Trees, 1971
Pursuit, 1973
The Collected Poems, 1981 (Ted Hughes, editor)
Selected Poems, 1985
Sylvia Plath: Poems, 2000

Nonfiction
Letters Home, 1975
The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1982 (Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, editors)
The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962, 2000

Children's Literature
The Bed Book, 1976

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CRITICAL INSIGHTS

About the Editor

Janet McCann is a Texas poet who has taught at Texas A&M University since 1969; she is a former director of the Creative Writing Division within the English Department. Journals publishing her work include *Kansas Quarterly*, *Parnassus*, *Nimrod*, *Sou'wester*, *Christian Century*, *Christianity and Literature*, *New York Quarterly*, *Tendril*, *Poetry Australia*, and *McCall's*, among many others. She has won four chapbook contests, sponsored by Pudding Publications, Chimera Connections, Franciscan University Press, and Plan B Press. A 1989 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship winner, she has also received a number of awards for single poems. With David Craig she has coedited three anthologies: *Odd Angles of Heaven* (1994), *Place of Passage* (2000), and *Poems of Francis and Clare* (2004). She has authored three books and five chapbooks of poems; her most recent poetry collection is *Emily's Dress* (2004). She also has coauthored two textbooks: *Creative and Critical Thinking* (second edition 1985, with Hugh McCann) and *In a Field of Words* (1993, with Sybil Estess). She is also the author of *Wallace Stevens: The Celestial Possible* (1996), as well as many scholarly articles and book chapters on subjects ranging from Saint Francis to Sylvia Plath.

About *The Paris Review*

The Paris Review is America's preeminent literary quarterly, dedicated to discovering and publishing the best new voices in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The magazine was founded in Paris in 1953 by the young American writers Peter Matthiessen and Doc Humes, and edited there and in New York for its first fifty years by George Plimpton. Over the decades, the *Review* has introduced readers to the earliest writings of Jack Kerouac, Philip Roth, T. C. Boyle, V. S. Naipaul, Ha Jin, Ann Patchett, Jay McInerney, Mona Simpson, and Edward P. Jones, and published numerous now-classic works, including Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, Donald Barthelme's *Alice*, Jim Carroll's *Basketball Diaries*, and selections from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (his first publication in English). The first chapter of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* appeared in the *Review*'s pages, as have stories by Rick Moody, David Foster Wallace, Denis Johnson, Jim Crace, Lorrie Moore, and Jeanette Winterson.

The Paris Review's renowned Writers at Work series of interviews, whose early installments include legendary conversations with E. M. Forster, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, is one of the landmarks of world literature. The interviews received a George Polk Award and were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Among the more than three hundred interviewees are Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Susan Sontag, and Toni Morrison. Recent issues feature conversations with Jonathan Franzen, Norman Rush, Louise Erdrich, Joan Didion, Norman

Mailer, R. Crumb, Michel Houellebecq, Marilynne Robinson, David Mitchell, Annie Proulx, and Gay Talese. In November 2009, Picador published the final volume of a four-volume series of anthologies of *Paris Review* interviews. The *New York Times* called the Writers at Work series "the most remarkable and extensive interviewing project we possess."

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The Paris Review was a finalist for the 2008 and 2009 National Magazine Awards in fiction and won the 2007 National Magazine Award in photojournalism. The *Los Angeles Times* recently called *The Paris Review* "an American treasure with true international reach," and the *New York Times* designated it "a thing of sober beauty."

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Acknowledgments

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