RE-CASTING SYLVIA PLATH: PLATH'S POETRY AS CULTURAL CONFESSION

BY

LISA NARBESUBER

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Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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"Re-casting Sylvia Plath: Plath's Poetry as Cultural Confession" provides a cultural critique of Plath's poetry, one that shifts focus away from recovering individualism or self-actualization to critiquing the formative fields of the social which rule subjectivity. Her late poems break from her early poems' fairy tale settings and preoccupation with self to a larger symbolic system which situates the self in the social.

Most critics, however, fail to take seriously Plath's collective, social, and historical agenda. Instead they limit themselves to psychological, mythological, or biographical readings. It is precisely this refusal of Plath's to find refuge in traditional categories of individualism and the nuclear family which differentiates her from so many of those contemporaries with which she is regularly compared. The "confessional" poets, for example, examine how the psyche shapes our impressions of the world, whereas Plath, inversely, looks at how the outside world shapes the self.
The dissertation, then, explores her poems as instances of dialogic process. The various voices in "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" (March 1962) offer dimension and difference to counter the monotony and monologic of the world she inhabits, while "In Plaster" (18 March 1961) enacts a dialogue between the subject as a culturally created artifact and collective fantasies. Among these late poems, and most obviously in "A Birthday Present" (30 September 1962), individual identity is often unstable or shifting, threatening the surrounding illusions of self-containment. In such poems as "Daddy" (12 October 1962), "Lady Lazarus" (23-29 October 1962), and her series of bee poems (3-7 October 1962), Plath shows the invisibility of social forces, and the crushing effect of that invisibility, especially on women. Nevertheless, the poems do less to demonstrate the crushing of the authentic or "real" self by the patriarchal, than show the role of (social) fantasy in the construction of the subject.
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Introduction: Critiquing Social Fantasy

In my reading of Sylvia Plath, I am persistently drawn back to her notions of fantasy, specifically her preoccupation with collective myths and scripts. Her late poetry, in particular, reflects her struggle to find fantasies that work, as well as her objective of defamiliarizing traditional fantasies, leaving the reader confronting a gaping hole. In her early poetry, the 'hole' is made 'whole.' Her early poetry fits in with New Critical ideals, well wrought urns, self-enclosed texts, written so as to announce their 'literariness'. Her, at times, archaic literary language offers the reader an array of stories, enchanted landscapes, romances, and other such pleasures. But in her late poetry, there is a relatively sudden shift as Plath denies the reader the pleasures of her enclosed lyrics: she refuses to fantasize a subjective plenitude. Wholeness is not a possibility. The hypnotic spell--and source of their pleasure--of her earlier fantasies appears deformed, unnatural, disturbing. The elements of her earlier fantasies have become no more than props, almost entirely artificial. One of the most important effects of this shift is that Plath's work no longer looks for, or at least no longer finds, closure in the ego, the unconscious, the landscape, the 'story', 'poetic' language but for openings onto the external world. She becomes less 'literary' and more concerned to carry on a dialogue with
cultural fantasies, histories, scripts, signs, images, traditions, and institutions that weave the self together.

In Plath's late work—for example, most obviously in "Burning the Letters" (13 Aug. 1962)\(^1\), "For a Fatherless Son" (26 Sept. 1962) and "Daddy" (12 Oct. 1962)—myths of traditional motherhood, femininity, marriage, and family have lost much of their power to sway the imagination. They are instead like so much defamiliarized material (signs, images, institutions, formulas, etc.) for manufacturing subjects.

Nothing is normal. In such poems as "The Applicant" (11 Oct. 1962) and "The Munich Mannequins" (28 Jan. 1963) she satirically delivers her message by literally turning the female body into a commodity. What often makes her work so disturbing is that the reader is made intensely aware that she is looking at human beings from the outside in, directing the reader from the culturally constructed surfaces to the human, so that one never forgets the artifice that produces subjectivity. Not surprisingly, much of Plath's work takes as its subject how antagonisms, contrary interests, and disunity are collectively masked or suppressed: in other words she brings debate and dialogue to the supposedly harmonious unity of the family of Man. This is especially apparent in "Face Lift" (15 Feb. 1961), "Tulips" (18 March 1961), "The Surgeon

\(^{1}\) Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981) 204-5. All subsequent references to poems by Plath are to this edition. Each poem's date of composition will be given the first time it is mentioned.
at 2 a.m." (29 Sept. 1961), and "Three Women": A Poem for Three Voices" (March 1962) where the personae are subject to the hospital's homogenizing environment. Within that unity Plath finds dissenting otherness everywhere.

And yet, her work has been seen as traditional or, if political, only ambiguously so. There is a tendency to apologize for her, or to find her work complicit because it lacks a female voice. Critics often have difficulty reconciling Plath's ambivalent attitude toward the patriarchal society in which she lived. Perhaps one problem is that her position is not simply one of clear-cut condemnation. Steven Axelrod captures some of this tension, arguing that Plath both "martyred herself to patriarchal tradition and rebelled against it; revered men's texts and defaced them . . ." (24). In his essay on Sylvia Plath and Mademoiselle magazine, Garry Leonard too reveals an ambivalent Plath, one who condemns the lessons of the fifties culture, while at the same time buying into them: "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" (63). Plath (as projected through the character of Esther in The Bell Jar [1963]) is both attracted to and repelled by the media's images and symbols of patriarchal control, found in magazine articles and advertisements for clothing, cosmetics, perfumes. Certainly, adopting the feminine mask gives the woman a
measure of subjective satisfaction, the illusion of a 'feminine protection'. As Simone de Beauvoir made clear: "To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal--this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste" (xxvii). Garry Leonard observes that Plath's heroine, Esther, desires "to conform to a permanent standard of 'femininity,'' even though she recognizes that to do so trivializes her status as a person" (63). But in essence, from my point of view, this trivializing of personhood is both the poison and the cure within Plath's work: for while the "trivial" deflates the consistency, the unity of the self, it simultaneously unveils the structural materials (fantasy, signs, images, scripts, myths, institutions, social organization) that cement the self (and social myths). Plath seizes upon these elements not only to deconstruct the self, but to bring us beyond fantasy to investigate the social machinery that manipulates personhood. In other words, she does not merely dress and undress, mask and unmask, sculpt and dissect, but rather Plath plays with the sources/elements/materials that could open and expand the dialogue with cultural power.

Given the drift of my thesis, I was delighted to find Christopher Beach, in the *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition* (1992), placing Plath among those "experimental" writers who were opposed to the romantic tradition, or New Critical ideals (45). As we will
see, Plath's late poetry is indeed a rejection of New Critical ideals of poetry, as well as the ego-centred romanticism as propagated by Harold Bloom that many feminist poets, critics, and revolutionaries ironically perpetuate. (Toni Saldivar draws parallels between Harold Bloom's theory of "gnosis" and the form of women's writing favoured by feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: "This [feminist writing] is the creed of ego-centred romanticism that asserts its essential rightness by breaking old forms and making new ones as acts of self-generated identity" [148].) In contrast, Plath does not invent a new utopian world vision for herself, or objectively describe, from a safe, controlling distance, the problem and explain where it is lacking. She does not organize the chaotic external world from the interior of her mind: she does not reconcile opposites or dull conflict by celebrating ambiguity. Her aim is not to reconcile anything. On the contrary, like Christopher Beach's Poundian tradition, Plath shatters the closure of mind and literary text by taking into account the Other, ideology, language, script, role, history, myth, to create a dialogue/confrontation with those historical forces that construct the self and the text. Like the Poundians, part of Plath's poetics necessitates challenging official versions of literature, history, and nature.

Part of Plath's revolutionary style (recognized by Alicia Ostriker, Mary Lynn Broe and Susan Van Dyne) is her use of "parody and mockery", forms born out of the poet's feelings of
"fear and rage" toward the dominating institutions. Susan Van Dyne points out in *Revising Life* (1993) that for American feminist critics, "rage" in women's writing "is identified with a narrative need, a desire for a revisionary or oppositional story of female experience that counters the dominant cultural fictions" (24). Plath's is certainly a poetics of rage, but she does more than oppose the prevailing structure of power. More than a mirror reflection, she appropriates and foregrounds the traditional structures; in other words her parodying has the added effect of insisting upon the artificiality of myths, fantasies, scripts that have been taken as natural. What is disturbing about Plath's "parody and mockery" is that there is no reassuring, shared 'real world' against which the ridicule is cast. This is made most explicitly clear in such poems as "The Detective" (1962), "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (1962), and "The Jailer" (1962) where, as Van Dyne tells us, "Plath recasts marriage as a criminal act": imagery of domestic confinement and physical dismemberment characterize the institution that also robs the poet of her voice (*Revising* 41). But it must be added that Plath's voice often turns this dismemberment against tradition. For her, all social elements are bits and pieces of material. For the most part, in her later work there is no transcendental standpoint (rationality, truth, nature, etc.) from which to dominate others. All that we have is a diversity of signs, images, privileged terms, some of which
('male', 'identity', 'nature', 'logic') have gained hegemony over others ('female', 'difference', 'art', 'rhetoric'). My concern is with how Plath gets beyond the notion of "true" and "false" selves,² or even selves produced by the unconscious, through an intense engagement with the various, mainly artificial, materials that clothe the nothingness of the self.

In his book For They Know Not What They Do (1991), Slavoj Žižek reinterprets the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Rather than praising the child for stating the obvious, Žižek criticizes and warns against the child's gesture as psychologically risky. The usual reading emphasizes that "by stating openly that the Emperor has no clothes, we intend only to get rid of the unnecessary hypocrisy and pretense" (11). Žižek does not deny this, but he gives us an unsettling supplement: "After the deed, when it is already too late, we suddenly notice that we got more than we bargained for" (11-12). For Žižek, such a liberating gesture turns out to have a catastrophic effect on the social order. The foolish innocent destroys the "consistency" of the "intersubjective network" (12), what Henrik Ibsen called "vital lies"³, or what Wallace

² Further discussion on the critical debate over Plath's "true" and "false" selves will be taken up in chapter one.

Stevens called "supreme fictions" (The Necessary Angel 31). Suddenly, all involved are rudely shocked into acknowledging fantasy as fantasy, fantasy as groundless (although not at all without real effects).

Sylvia Plath in her late poetry is a bit like this story's child, with some important differences. She has a vested interest in 'the game'. And in her relentless undermining of cultural fantasies (I imagine the child's role ends shortly after its comment, before it goes back to its toys; after all, what does it really care?) she keeps the revolutionary moment, the essential lack of essentialism in the social order of things, right before our eyes. Ian Hamilton comes close to this understanding of Plath when he writes in a review of The Colossus:

it is the impossibility of 'seeing things as they are', and the blank horror this provokes, that preoccupies her in these poems. There is a kind of nightmarish panic beneath their tough, enigmatic surfaces; the concrete world fragments into emblems of menace that are denoted in a tone of flat surrender. (50)

What Hamilton describes here as "the blank horror" and "the impossibility of 'seeing things as they are'" as exhibited in Plath's poetry is similar to the experiences of the
townspeople after they are told that the Emperor has no
clothes.

In creating just such a catastrophic climate, Plath
reveals the negativity that is the self: that structured
nothingness. Or, conversely, she shows how everything is
clothing, artifice; we are mere masks. Her psychic world is
harsh and ugly. Instead of making the ugly (a sign of death
and fragmentation of wholeness) or the banal appear beautiful
and complete (i.e., fantasy, that illusion which, as Žižek
would say, supports all of our discourses, giving them
consistency), or the beautiful a beautiful whole, Plath
reveals the supposedly beautiful in all its ugliness as
disturbingly fractured. In direct opposition to the creed of
much Romantic poetry,⁴ it is as if she heeds Nietzsche's
words: "To experience a thing as beautiful means: to
experience it necessarily wrongly" (qtd. in Sontag, On
Photography 184). Specifically, rather than showing female
beauty as natural and harmonious, she exposes the 'beauty' of
women as something constructed, artificial, contrived, even
grotesque and painfully deformed. In fact, even to suggest
that, say, Woman with a capital W, as an eternal verity, is
'constructed', a piece of clothing, must appear as an ugly

⁴ "Much of Romantic poetry records a quest for the lost
wholeness and transcendence of the imaginary, an attempt to
find in nature a mirror which will reflect an image of the
subject at one with itself and its context, a unity which
precedes differences" (Belsey 123).
affront, a stain, to adherents of the 1950s' fantasy. Simone de Beauvoir argued that "the males could not enjoy this privilege fully unless they believed it to be founded on the absolute and the eternal" (xxviii). Plath in her late poetry continually rejects the notion of Woman as natural, absolute and eternal by foregrounding Her as constructed fantasy.

Images of fragmentation and disunity dominate Plath's portrayal of women in the late poetry. She gathers up the clothing, the elements (and positioning) of her construction—her Stepford wife-like construction⁵—and reflects it back to the world as a violent negativity. Which is to say, this construction is an unworkable fantasy—i.e., she is not comforted by the fantasy; the clothes fail to fit her. Its particular form depends on victimizing those who must assume their identities under its sign—the supposedly exalted figure, Woman. Plath's goal is not so simplistic or reactionary as the discarding of her clothing, her objectification. Instead, she will wear it with a vengeance excessively, grotesquely—as if to undress the dress itself, make it naked, the decent appearing indecent! This means she will not allow the fantasy (Woman) to appear in its smooth

⁵ The Stepford Wives, adapted from the best-selling novel by Ira Levin, is a 1975 science-fiction movie directed by Bryan Forbes documenting the 'perfect' white, upper-middle class, American town (Stepford, Connecticut) where families from the outside strive to make their homes one day. Here, the women have been transformed (captured and made into machines) by the men who desire them to be traditional, dutiful, subservient, complacent wives and mothers.
consistency (i.e., a workable fantasy), but rather she will wear it so that its constructedness sticks out freakishly, the very image of obscenity.

Plath's situation is complex; as I have suggested, she does not go along with the idea—a guiding idea in the satire of *The Stepford Wives*—that women are pure objectification and that there is an ideal subjectivity somewhere. Despite the fact that patriarchal culture actively objectifies women, it simultaneously masks this objectification by transforming Woman into the very thematization of care (the nurturer, the mother, the lover, the nurse—an object or commodity who is also a desiring subject whose desire is constructed to fill the lack in the male subject). Plath tells us in her late poems that Woman is more than an object, that she is in the peculiar position of an object that wants and desires. Specifically, she desires to be desired which inevitably leads to the patriarchal response and her imprisonment in the opposite sex's script: 'she wants it'. Consequently, the (obscene) masks Plath adopts are the ones that the culture looks upon approvingly, reassuringly and reassured. Notice her acute awareness of this situation as early as 1952 when she was just 20 years old: "Masks are the order of the day—and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (*Journals* 62). The mask promises plenitude for the male, a solution to his needs, care for him and his children. But because Plath's masks are
obscene (masks appearing as masks instead of real: this is the dysfunctional fantasy), we acutely feel, instead of care/Care, her discomfort, her antagonism. Plath flaunts her obscene masks and uses them as a weapon, an imploding bomb. The intrusion of such violence into this idyllic scene threatens the culture's illusion of naturalness; she is unnatural, and because the male looks to her for a solution for his own lack, the image he now gets back exposes just how much masculinity depends on her (feminine) image.

Uncomfortably, Plath allows subjectivity and objectification to cohabit within the same skin, without rationalisation; in this she stages a drama between two terms of a dialectic which she shows literally in "In Plaster" (18 March 1961). In essence, this splitting reveals both the failure of the old fantasies (masculine/feminine, subject/object) as well as setting the scene for a more workable fantasy, as we will see in such later poems as "Lady Lazarus" (23-29 Oct. 1962) --although, I do not think she moves into the promised land of a new, workable fantasy. This is a genuinely revolutionary moment in Plath's corpus, and Pamela Annas even goes so far as to note, in her essay "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems" (1980), that the position of the speaker in some of Plath's poems and fiction "is close to that of the Marxist conception of the proletariat" (134) as discussed first by Georg Lukacs in History and Class Consciousness (1922) and later by Fredric
Jameson in *Marxism and Form* (1971). Annas explains: "Sylvia Plath has this dialectical awareness of self as both subject and object in particular relation to the society in which she lived" (135). For Lukacs, this moment of recognition equalled a philosophical nirvana in which the subject finally coincided with the object, a Western dream since Plato's dialectics. For Lukacs, this coincidence would fuel the revolution; it was to be a moment of empowerment. But while I agree that the dialectical moment exists in Plath's work, what is perhaps most significant about her is that she constantly distances herself from any utopian vision. She refuses to 'patch' things up (in this case, Lukacs's vision of a whole, communist society, a radical fantasy of social unity—a fantasy which Lukacs himself later abandoned and criticized). She is more negative than Lukacs in that she maintains the fact of artificiality. Plath documents the failure of the fantasy and leaves us with no resolution: an impossible position, but one that takes us to the inevitable social constructedness of the self. Her concern is with the outside world, how it shapes the self. It is from this historicized self that a new step can be taken.

In a more positive sense, Plath does seek out knowledge. Her notion of the subject allows for an embracement of the female body, its objectification, and a study of the way it has been made or written in order to learn, read and write from it. This learning enacts an archaeology of the body, as
she recognizes her body as object-text, and then gains knowledge by retracing the seams. It is as if Plath puts up for scrutiny the stitches that pierced the woman's body, the linguistic-ideological threads that bind her, the castration of the female tongue, and the constricting insertion of the female body within the family.

The result is a poetry that is sometimes 'campy'. Plath flaunts her objectification, takes it as her own and perversely exaggerates it in a way that, at the very least, borders on camp. This is again another way of making us aware of the external self, and the self as constructed artifice, mere clothing. According to Susan Sontag in Against Interpretation (1961), "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (275). Somehow both attractive and offensive, "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism . . . . That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (277). Camp "takes on overtones of the acute, the esoteric, the perverse" (281). Finally, "to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role" (280). Role-playing, exaggeration, artifice, perversion: these, too, characterize such conspicuous Plath subjects as Lady Lazarus, for example. Lady Lazarus's flagrant, ostentatious, campy exhibition foregrounds her objectified condition, while it simultaneously exposes a
powerful, emerging subjectivity (which is, in part, the subject of chapter four).

The problem is that this favouring of the camp in her poetry to express personal persecution as well as vengeance has caused some Plath readers to question her legitimacy as a significant poet, especially when humour is not even acknowledged by these critics as part of her poetic style.

(Shesignificantly called the bitterest of her poems "comic", a distinguishing aspect of camp). Plath has been accused of emotionalism, of drawing inappropriate parallels (specifically between herself and the persecuted Jew during the Holocaust—a symbol of the ultimate victim), and of being solipsistic with solipsism's implications of madness. In a more general sense, the "passionate excess" which underscores her poetry "has provoked much of the hostile criticism she has received" (Yorke 50). The problem is that excess, by definition, goes beyond unity, order and wholeness; and the ideal of unity, order and wholeness is considered a necessary element of a

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6 Jacqueline Rose, in her book The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (1992), cites a category of Plath critics who read her work as pathology: at best "something we should both admire and avoid" (3). Some of the most prominent members of this camp include Edward Butscher, Irving Howe, Stephen Spender, Anne Stevenson, Hugh Kenner, Denis Donoghue, David Holbrook, Joyce Carol Oates and Harold Bloom. Rose argues that Plath criticism is divided between this group and an opposing feminist camp which sees Plath's inner nature as representative. I would situate Lynda Bundtzen, Judith Kroll, Susan Van Dyne, Lynda Wagner, Alicia Ostriker, Pamela Annas, Mary Lynn Broe, Marjorie Perloff, Sandra Gilbert, Suzanne Juhasz, Rochelle Ratner and, for all intents and purposes, Jacqueline Rose herself as part of this latter group.
good poem (all of which I will discuss more fully in my first chapter).

Overstatement is an essential part of Plath's technique. By taking Woman to an extreme or fulfilment she displays a personality structure that demonstrates the inadequacy of the form, the unworkability of the fantasy. Her presentation of the 'feminine' fails to run smoothly and becomes obscene, surreal and freakish. Moreover, as Susan Sontag argues, camp is at its best when "dead serious", unconscious, "unintentional" (282). And Plath does not necessarily intend to be campy as such. Rather she is supersensitive to, or hyperconscious of, the constructedness and incompleteness of people, most specifically women. Her attempt at playing out the 'feminine' script does not come naturally; she imitates symbols that lack meaning for her. She fails to experience her self as unified and, instead, realizes for us her self as scripted, a pre-packaged discourse. It is for this reason that Plath's poetry is mutinous. Her subjects may not be obviously revolutionary; nonetheless, Plath is revolutionary in demonstrating the obsolescence of the feminine image. In this sense, she may be aligned with the second wave of feminism stemming from Simone de Beauvoir who in 1949 announced in The Second Sex: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267). Plath discloses a personality

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7 In her book Contemporary Feminist Thought (1983), Hester Eisenstein outlines the history of contemporary feminism from the 1970s through to the early 1980s. The first
structure which demonstrates the inadequacy of the form we have come to know as Woman.

Wave of feminism sought to emancipate women legally, whereas the second wave of feminism interrogated women's psychological subordination. As documented in Kate Millet's book Sexual Politics (1970), first wave feminism began with the campaign for women's rights that arose out of the abolition of slavery and extended to the women's suffrage movement in the United States in 1920 (Eisenstein 6). According to Eisenstein, Simone de Beauvoir laid the foundation for the powerful second phase of the debate which advocated that "the socially constructed differences between the sexes were judged to be the chief source of female oppression" (xi). In Beauvoir's words "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (Beauvoir xxii). As a solution to women's secondary status, Kate Millet, Shulmith Firestone and others advocated "the replacement of gender polarization with some form of androgyny" (Eisenstein xi). But the implications were disturbing for many. Joan Didion, for one, commented:

All one's actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it— that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death—could now be declared invalid, unnecessary, one never felt it at all. (qtd. in Eisenstein 4)

Perhaps in consequence, about the middle of the 1970s there was a shift in the terms of the debate set by Beauvoir and extended by the early writers of the second wave. Feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow rejected androgyny in favour of a woman-centred perspective:

Instead of seeking to minimize the polarization between masculine and feminine, it sought to isolate and to define those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of strength and power for women . . . . (Eisenstein xii)

Rather than being seen as a hindrance, female difference was celebrated as a source of women's liberation. But in some versions of this new perspective (those held by Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin) biological determinism uncomfortably replaced the social construction of gender: men by definition were considered corrupt, while women were seen as intrinsically morally superior (Eisenstein 141).
In chapter one, I outline the existing Plath criticism (both pro and con), briefly consider the "confessional" poets, and provide an analysis of Plath's own poetic development. I argue that Plath's late poems break from her earlier conformist style which seems to support cultural myths. She moves from a preoccupation with self to a larger formative symbolic system that situates the self in the social. Nevertheless, critics fail to take seriously Plath's collective significance and social critique. Rather, they tend to limit their readings to individual psychological critiques. Critics desiring 'normalcy' situate the poem's chaos in the individual, rather than in the world where it would be regarded as a collective problem.

In my reading, I hope to shift focus from recovering individualism or self-actualization to critiquing the formative fields of the social which rules subjectivity. I want to resituate the private and the individual subject within the public world. Plath's poems insist on returning us to the external world. It is just this refusal to find refuge in traditional categories of individualism that differentiates Plath from so many of her contemporaries. Whereas the Confessional and lyrical poets look at how the psyche shapes the external world, Plath works in the inverse, exposing how the outside world shapes the self.

In chapter two, I focus on Plath's poems as instances of a dialogic process—not as dialogue between nature and
culture, but between the subject as a culturally created artifact and collective fantasies. "In Plaster" shows various sources of dialogue that come to determine the self. In particular, it exposes the "white" self's repression of the "yellow" self's right to speak its difference; in other words it dramatizes how social myths form emotional and moral responses.

In the third chapter, I show how Plath turns the singularity of the "white" cast and the singularity of the "yellow" self into collectivities which emphasize the larger social context. In "Three Women", the monotonous, white, "flat" hospital, inhabited by working, homogenous figures (nurses, doctors) is pitted against the protruding bodies of three pregnant women. The result is a menagerie of voices. The women at times are defined by their great shape; while other times they are flattened into indistinction. But despite their desire to conform or not, they are always porous bodies which signify shifting identities, threatening the surrounding illusions of self-containment. This instability of body is mirrored in the narrative of such poems as "A Birthday Present" (30 Sept. 1962), where the poem's continual questions and lack of solid ego identifications create a disorienting effect. The incomprehensibility of "A Birthday Present", like so much of Ezra Pound's poetry, for example, highlights the signified over the signifier; it points up the poem's external make-up, its constructedness and
artificiality. It is this general focus on the external which makes her more experimental compared to her (confessional) contemporaries.

In chapter four, I examine Plath's controversial method of turning the private and the individual into public, collective, and historical spectacles. In such notorious poems as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", Plath gives us an extreme attempt at self-possession by a woman who has lost her body to a non-communal, rationalized society. In the bee poems ("The Bee Meeting" 3 Oct. 1962, "The Arrival of the Bee Box" 4 Oct. 1962, "Stings" 6 Oct. 1962, "The Swarm" 7 Oct. 1962, "Wintering" 9 Oct. 1962) and in "The Rabbit Catcher" (21 May 1962), Plath shows the invisibility of social forces and the crushing effects of that invisibility, especially on women who have been locked, like the bees and the rabbits, in the privacy of the home/hive/trap. In these poems, Plath shows culture and nature not in opposition, but as sliding into each other. The woman, like a queen bee, desires freedom and independence from the society/hive, yet is lost, if not dead, without it.

What have come to be known by Plath critics as the bee poems are about Sylvia Plath's beekeeping experiences at her cottage in Devon where she lived with Ted Hughes (Van Dyne, "More Terrible" 154). Critics do not include "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (1959) among the bee poems since it was written three years earlier.
Plath's poetry does not so much demonstrate the crushing of the authentic or "real" self by the patriarchal, as show the role of (social) fantasy in the construction of the subject. Plath abandons the lyric's 'feel good' conclusion, and explores the terms 'male' and 'female' without having to find a fantasy that masks the antagonism. Even though Plath's lyrical style, whether in her earlier or later poetry, is most often refined and polished, the late poems effect a sense of ugliness—fragmentation, disorder, and pain. Liz Yorke in her book *Impertinent Voices* (1991) rightly maintains:

Sylvia Plath did not find any material or symbolic restitution to counter the situation she found herself in. Neither did she, finally, find a sufficient mythic mode of displacing the feminine model, that is, the male projections, the patriarchal scene of representation. (90)

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9 The confessional, occasional, short, lyrical poem has been, in retrospect, particularly singled out for its preoccupation with the void and the need to fill it. On the one hand, this poetry is intensely aware of the hole, of the subject as lack. As Mark Bracher writes in his brilliant rewriting of Lacan: "Lyric poetry often presents a persona in the position of the divided subject" (68); but too often this hole is patched up at an absurd, aesthetic level, "providing master signifiers that promise to close up the division" (68). If truth is beauty (a master signifier, supported metonymically by images of wholeness, timelessness, plenitude), ugliness is the big bad other: bits and pieces, fragmentation, discord and dismemberment, everything that threatens the self's sense of unity.
Still, even if Plath does not provide a solution or a resolution, she sets the scene for it by presenting the female subject as fragmented, as porous, and as collective; she offers dimension and difference to counter the monotony and monologic of the world she inhabits. Ultimately, Plath demonstrates in her writing that she cannot be contained (as Woman). She directs the inner, the intimate, and the familial outward, turning the personal into a cultural confession.
Ch. 1: A Brief History of Plath Criticism and Her Poetic Development

Most critics tell the same story, that Plath begins writing formulaic exercises and topics and becomes more dynamic and skeptical later in her career. Sympathetic critics see in this a progression. In general, reviews described Ariel (published as forty poems in 1965 in the UK, and forty-three poems in 1966 in the US) as exhibiting "an enormous gain in intensity and, one suspects, in seriousness of purpose" (Hamilton 50) compared to the earlier written The Colossus (1960) which lacked "personal involvement" (Hamilton 50) and "seemed 'craft'-centred and a bit derivative" (Rosenthal 32). In a 1966 review, Peter Davison argues that "Sylvia Plath's talent, though intensely cultivated, did not bloom into genius until the last months of her life . . ." (39). Even the poems from Crossing the Water (published in 1971, but written after The Colossus and before Ariel) were considered by most commentators as "transitional" pieces, or "the earlier stages in the development which culminated in Ariel" (Aird, "Review" 137). Eventually, her "academic formalism" (Ostriker, Stealing 78) and "fastidious control" (Dickie, Sylvia Plath viii) gave way "to her late violent freedoms" (Dickie viii) and "a brilliantly polished original style" (Ostriker 78).
Unsympathetic critics tend not to see any blossoming from formulaic verse to a more profound, unique style. From their perspectives, Plath fails in her late poetry to keep her extravagant emotions under wraps. In fact, few commentators have been comfortable with the tone of her most notorious poems. Irving Howe calls "Daddy" "ill-controlled" (232) and "utterly disproportionate" (233). He argues that the Ariel poems in general "are deficient in plasticity of feeling, the modulation of voice that a poet writing out of a controlled maturity of consciousness can muster" (235). Helen Vendler, who has written widely on poetry, describes "Lady Lazarus" as "a melange of incompatible styles, as though in a meaningless world every style could have its day" ("Intractable" 10). She continues: "There is more outrage and satire and hysteria in some of the last poems than there is steady thought, especially steady thought evinced in style" (12).

In considering the history of Plath criticism, a striking feature among the majority of her supporters and detractors alike is their pronounced insistence on normalcy, on "steady thought" in her poetry. In most cases, control becomes the vital touchstone from which Plath is judged. New Criticism seems to be the prime influence upon these critics. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, as leaders in the movement, stress "unity", "coherence", "harmony", "organization", "clarity and precision" as the most vital components of the good poem (See The Well Wrought Urn [1947] and Understanding
In turn, it is the business of the poet to actively unify, harmonize, organize, etc. that which is felt, known and observed. Adhering to the edicts of New Criticism, many defenders and defamers of Plath doggedly search for and insist upon what they call "maturity", "sanity", and "normality". Sounding rather obsessive themselves, these critics can only perceive the absence of a homogenous ground lorded over by a unified consciousness that New Criticism postulates. Yet such stability is overwhelmingly in evidence in the later poetry, as we will see; it is just that Plath is more interested in homogeneity's oppressive weight, its historicity, and the automaton-like nature of the subjects created which keep the whole thing running smoothly.

Certainly Plath felt the excessive demands of her culture. Her poetry, like the critical response, demonstrates the difficulty of expressing new thoughts within the confines of the status quo (mature, steady) language. Plath complains that she must play the "Angel in the House",¹⁰ that age-old construct which would petrify her being and radically restrict the range of her voice. Those critics who admire Plath are

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¹⁰ In The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House" as representing the ideal nineteenth-century woman. According to Patmore's patriarchal standards, woman is angelic, passive, docile, sweet, beautiful, and above all selfless. See John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" in Sesame and Lilies (1865) for perhaps a better Victorian source of the described ideal woman. For my purposes, I will refer to Gilbert and Gubar's reference since theirs is more commonly used and recognized.
often just as guilty as those who criticize her in that they undermine the force of her violent dialectic by reforming her: seeing in her work an attempt to find a well-adjusted, healthy and whole being. The latter attitude fails to comprehend the extremity of her position, as we shall see. Perhaps what is most unacceptable to these critics is the dialectical blow delivered by her later work against her earlier work and coextensively against the demands of her culture. From this point of view, their labelling her and her work hysterical attempts to defuse the effect of her poetic disobedience. According to this dialectical narrative, Plath breaks away from her early conformist poetry which is in thrall to cultural myths and drags those myths down to earth, into a history which is rife with competing desires masked by language.

In Plath's late poems like "Burning the Letters" and "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" (11 July 1962) she straightforwardly and 'realistically' relays significant moments in her life. However, for the most part among her late poems, she recasts her self in blatantly fictional terms (queen bee, rabbit, Lazarus), fantasies that do not fit comfortably into an enchanted landscape, for that landscape has taken on the violent monotony of modernity. Critics have understood this recasting as a transformation or a desire for transformation of the self. Sylvia Plath's heroines, whether
they be insects, animals, or legendary figures, become for prominent Plath critic Judith Kroll representations of Plath's "true" nature. Similarly, Susan Van Dyne believes that the bee poems express "Plath's search for an authentic and autonomous self. In telling the story of the queen, Plath sought to give shape to her experience as a woman and a poet" ("'More Terrible'" 156).

True enough, the bee poems demonstrate a peculiar worldliness: they do situate her experiences as both woman and poet. But counter to many readings that set the tone for Plath criticism, the bee poems in my view are also satires or parodies of her (and our) bee-like condition, or poems of resentment, and not ideal "transformations" of the self. Plath's animal and mythic heroines may be exaggerated expressions of herself and her situation, but her identification with the queen bee, rather than representing authenticity, can equally be read as a thematic inscription of functionalism and sexual stereotyping. She is reduced to a reproductive machine surrounded by the programmatic activity of the machine-like drones. The bee poems, like most of her

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11 In my outline of Plath criticism, I refer regularly to Judith Kroll since she was the first to discuss the concepts of "true" and "false" selves in Plath's poetry which has had such a profound effect on all subsequent readings to date. Among recent critics, Susan Van Dyne points out that virtually all Plath scholars "have posited such a combat between a true and false, socialized self as a central tension" (Revising 25). Similarly, Jacqueline Rose writes that the concept of a true or "emergent female selfhood . . . has been crucial in the reading of these late poems" (144).
later poems, display her subjects' terrible condition. Often, as in the bee poems, Plath's vision extends to the whole of the social world. She is not—as in much confessional poetry—subject oriented.

This fictionalizing of the self and her life is, then, as Terry Eagleton describes it, "life bottled, boxed and artificially suspended, but still, somehow, life" (152). I tend to agree with Joyce Carol Oates who identifies a recurring tendency throughout all Plath's work—whether considering a realistic story like The Bell Jar or the fantastic imagery of "Lady Lazarus"—"to dehumanize people, to flatten everyone into 'cut-paper people,' most of all herself. She performs a kind of reversed magic, a desacralizing ritual for which psychologists have terms—reification, rubricization" (222). Instead of making whole a split self (as most critics read it), Plath foregrounds human dismemberment and lets the fragments fester to the point where characters lose their humanity; and more positively (than Oates reads it), Plath looks at how 'humanity' is constructed—as an effect of language, institutions, mechanized culture, etc. Instead of reading her as imbalanced or psychotic, one can perhaps more accurately read Plath as foregrounding the modern world's own cultural style—a style characterized by industry's mechanization (droning monotony), compartmentalization (dismemberment of the psyche and the
social body), and exchange values (women as commodities), to list but a few.

In keeping with that cultural style's need to compartmentalize, many critics, even sympathetic ones, insist on confining Plath within the limits of the category of the individual self, or psyche. Rather than taking seriously Plath's trenchant social critique, the concentration of Plath criticism offers a psychoanalytical angle. In her influential book *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976), Kroll acknowledges a recurring dehumanized image of Plath's various heroines. However, basing her analysis on a romantic conception of the self--as a split between a false and a true self that needs to be healed--Kroll goes on to save Plath's heroines from their fragmented and painful end:

> the true self is the child [Sylvia Plath] was before things went wrong; that part, as "Electra on Azalea Plath" makes plain, lies buried with her father. The part which has continued to live after her father's death is, then, incomplete, a kind of false self; and the life lived by it is, to that extent, unreal. (10)

For Kroll, this tension between the false and the true Sylvia Plath "consequently pervades all future manifestations of self, whether in relation to others or in her image of
herself" (10). Thus, false images take such guises as a 'drudge' in "Stings" or the submissive doll-woman in "Purdah" (29 Oct. 1962):

The false self of the heroine is ineffectual, dominated, and powerless . . . . The true self (the positive, whole, reborn self) is associated with artistic creativity, and with the autonomy possible only if one is not defined primarily in relation to an other. (10)

As a wife, daughter, or mother, in the state of male-defined roles, in such poems as "The Applicant", "Daddy", and "Stings" she may be regarded as the embodiment of a false self. By contrast, "Lady Lazarus, the lioness, and the queen bee are not male-dependent," but "represent triumph over the negative, male-defined aspects of these typical female roles" (10) and, as such, speak of a true self.

According to Kroll, the emergence of the authentic self, however, does not mean the expulsion of the false self. Rather, the true and false selves coexist, as is represented by, for example, "the lioness masked by the doll-bride in 'Purdah'; the queen bee sleeping in the guise of a drudge, a worker bee, in 'Stings'" (11). Judith Kroll admits that such a state is intolerable for the heroine. Suicide attempts are attempts to kill the false self, so that it can be reborn
entirely new and true (that is, free from male-dependence). Ironically, "a life lived by the false self, is not life but an intolerable death-in-life which can be overcome only by dying to that life" (12), "... while the rebirth of the true self promises life-in-death" (13). In short, she builds for herself a lose-lose situation.

However, if we are to transcend Kroll's existential psychology, we must move beyond the preoccupation with the self and situate it in the social, with a larger formative symbolic system. For Plath, all these various selves or heroines are nothing more nor less than literary or social constructions, marks and myths attempting to limit people's desires. This sign system of selves does not emerge from within the individual, but is exterior to her. For Plath, the battleground is not some inner struggle. She wages war on the public field, where signs are manufactured and circulated. For Kroll, on the other hand, the poems present us with a subject who is forever striving toward wholeness, just as Kroll herself seeks an ultimate wholeness in Plath's poetry and the "true" Sylvia Plath. Believing in an essential self, assuming it must exist, many critics attempt to seek it out. As Jacqueline Rose makes clear in The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, Kroll is not alone in privileging "the concept of the emergent female selfhood" (144). It is "strangely shared by one form of feminist criticism and by Ted Hughes" (144) along with those members of his opposing camp:
What the two have in common is an image of transcendence—poetic, psychological, political—in which Plath finally takes off from, burns herself out of, whatever it was (false self from Hughes, Hughes himself for feminism) that had her in its thrall. (144)

Rose cautions against "attempting to read Plath's writing in terms of a positive emergence of selfhood" (86-87). She argues that this reading "tends to be teleological" (144) and wonders in any case, "[at the most immediate level, how can such a concept work as a model for female (for any) identity, since it involves not the assertion but the sublation of self?" (144-145). She along with a few of the more recent postmodern critics question "the plausibility of such a 'true' self, who would exist outside or be immune to ideology" (Van Dyne, Revising 25). But even among these critics' most recent readings, interpretations still revolve around the psychology of (Plath's) self. For Rose, this translates into the study of Plath's "unbearable coexistence of opposites [opposite selves]" (87), which shifts attention from Plath's own social critique.

Plath's poetry proposes that the self is built on useful fantasies. In her tracing of the divided or rather dismembered self, she may be attracted to the representation of a man-eating, self-resurrected woman or a powerful queen...
bee. But such obvious fabrications of self ultimately highlight their own fantastical existence, so that even these "true" selves are impossible to live. Her poetry brings to consciousness the self as construct and commodity, built upon not so much individual fantasies as collective ones. Plath's is an 'intersubjective' and de-naturalized self, one never 'independent' of the historical as Kroll would have it, with her notion of the "true" self.

In the above paragraphs, I have focused on Judith Kroll's impulse to heal Plath's wounds, to read for a positive, unified, true Plath, rather than leaving her as a split, fragmented and unresolved or undefined woman; there is a need on Kroll's part to tie up loose ends and ignore ambiguous and contradictory relationships and images in order to counter the obviously divided representations of the living female character in Plath's poetry, or in order to deal with an unacceptable poetic style. In pondering the abundance of material on Plath, Dave Smith wonders: "Maybe we feel if we can't explain her we can't explain ourselves" (270).

According to Kroll at least, Plath or the speaker in the poems certainly agonizes and struggles, but ultimately she asserts herself as a sane, accomplished, strong, independent woman poet. Kroll believes in the possibility and independent attainment of a whole, autonomous self.
She is not alone in this desire to make a split Sylvia Plath whole. According to Jacqueline Rose in her analysis of Plath commentary:

the ... idea of authenticity, integrity, psychic and aesthetic wholeness has appeared as the standard against which Plath has been measured. Speaking in the name of that wholeness, criticism thus establishes its own sanity through the distance it strikes from her work. (16)

Throughout feminist critical readings of Plath's poems there persists a pressing desire to write the narrative of a mighty "Ur-Woman" even when the text does not warrant it. Toril Moi explains in Sexual/Textual Politics (1985) that for Anglo-American feminist critics (in particular Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar), "ideology becomes a monolithic unified totality that knows no contradictions; against this a miraculously intact 'femaleness' may pit its strength" (63). Kroll and others (for example, Pamela Annas, Lynda Bundtzen, Mary Lynn Broe), in their analyses of Plath's work, may be mirroring what Moi describes as the American feminists' belief that "women's writing can only come into existence as a structural and objective whole. Parallel to the wholeness of the text is the wholeness of the woman's self; the integrated humanist individual is the essence of all creativity" (66).
For this reason, these Plath critics, in their desire to support the poet, are determined to read the texts as organic unities.

For example, whereas for Judith Kroll the queen bee represents the "true" Plath self, for Pamela Annas she symbolizes the androgynous self, transcending gender as one, while for Lynda Bundtzen the queen more specifically signifies the woman as writer. Nevertheless, in each instance the transformation to a certain wholeness exists. Notice Pamela Annas's emphasis on unity and completeness in the following:

The self-image as bee, with its associations of periodic rebirth and the sense of being an integral part of a community, of purity and wholeness, of a connection not only with one's immediate society but with a larger, transcendent world, moves the poet toward an androgynous moment of completion, union, and dialectical cyclical alternation of stasis and process. (my emphases Disturbance 159)

Critics such as Mary Lynn Broe and Lynda Bundtzen are determined to read the poems as an exploration of "the triumphant side of [Plath's] femininity through an identification with the queen bee" (Bundtzen 181), although at the same time they acknowledge that the queen is a "paradoxical symbol of power" and "a symbol of ambiguous
achievement" (Broe 143). According to Lynda Bundtzen, Plath's identification with the queen is ambivalent "because the queen, although she rules the hive, is also owned by it, subject to its laws. She is a murderess and scapegoat for her society . . ." (181). More generally, Bundtzen admits that the group of poems in which Plath triumphantly recreates "her self in new and vital forms" (34) is small, and even among these few poems "these new selves . . . are never completely free from the contradictory circumstances in which they are born" (35). The queen bee is a symbol of enslavement; like the "Angel in the House" she is contained. Nevertheless, Bundtzen, like Broe, maintains that these poems reflect "a newly achieved emotional freedom" (35) and "an overall intention in Plath's life and work . . . to create a beautiful self . . ." (35-36). The wording here--"beautiful", "emotional", even "self"--turn attention from Plath's concerns with social processes.

Similarly, Edward Butscher ignores Plath's intense dialogue with her larger social world, offering a more explicitly biographical interpretation. He sees "Wintering" as a poem about Plath's ability to cope with Ted Hughes's departure, as projecting the strength of women to overcome depression in the face of desertion (346-347). But since Plath's tone is angrier in these late poems, Butscher's praises are not somehow without reservations; he refers to her late poems as "the bitch goddess poems" (341), which project
"the myth of the bitch goddess or evil double" (341), rather than the anger of the housewife. Butscher seems to believe in a societal script in which the housewife, or "Angel in the House", is not supposed to be angry.

By focusing on the conclusions of poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Stings", and "Wintering", Plath commentators echo each other's desires to discover or recover some imaginary totality, despite imagery to the contrary. Butscher writes with respect to the bee poems: "Happily, the last line of the last poem is filled with hope for the future, reflecting its author's own sense of breakthrough which seemed to guarantee survival" (349). Other critics too find a final "note of reemergent life after the experiences of ritual, familial, and political death" (Rosenblatt 129) or "an image of triumph and escape from constraint and confinement" (Ferrier 210).

Readers have regarded the irrepressible "Lady Lazarus" in particular as offering "a triumph of vitality" (Broe 175); a journey "from a life of abuse and nightmare to one of liberation" (Markey, Journey 122); a wonderful "searingly self-confident" (Van Dyne, Revising 55) exhibition of the speaker's "true identity as a triumphant resurrecting goddess, the fully liberated, fiery true self . . ." (Kroll 118-119); an expression of the struggling woman artist's "independent creative powers . . . . She is neither mad nor 'ugly and hairy', but a phoenix, a flame of released bodily energy" (Bundtzen 33-34). But such statements are more an expression
of the commentators' need for wholeness and steady thought than anything else.

In fact, the poems do not bear out the critics' assumptions. There are no happy endings. When Plath conjures the image of "wholeness", she immediately undercuts it by emphasizing the split between her heroine's new identity and the social world. This move emphasizes the social, the intersubjective rather than the intrasubjective splits that Kroll and others focus attention on. The intersubjective split tends to cancel out the new identity. After all, a princess is defined in relation to her prince or court; a queen is defined in relation to her kingdom and subjects. In other words, these new identities do not reinvoke the earlier poetry's romantic unities; on the contrary, they are born on the brink of dissolution, testaments to their own impossibility, without their backdrops and props.

Of course Plath is not alone in dramatizing a split between the self and the social Other. We see it, for example, in John Berryman's depiction of Henry in The Dream Songs (1959). In fact, Berryman's Song #384 brings to mind Plath's "Daddy". Berryman's Song begins:

The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done,
I stand above my father's grave with rage,
often, often before
I've made this awful pilgrimage to one
who cannot visit me, who tore his page out: I come back for more,

Just as Plath's persona imagines putting a stake in her father's heart and hopelessly declares "I'm through", an enraged Henry fantasizes crawling into his father's grave and playing "his final card" by crashing an ax into his father's remains. The split (literally reinforced here) between the self and all that the parent represents remains irrevocable in both cases. But despite their similarities, Berryman adopts a more romantic point of view compared to Plath which results in notable differences between the two poets. "The Dream Songs" lack any final closure, perhaps much as Plath's late poems fail to conclude neatly; however, whereas "Henry's inability to explain the mystery of death or to answer any of the questions that have plagued him is something Berryman regarded as serious" (Conarroe 145), it would be out of character for Plath in her poetry to consider such existential questions. Unseduced by philosophical detachment, her focus is grounded in social conflict. On the other hand, Berryman does not investigate the cultural productions of his characters, as Plath does. He thinks...in terms of binary oppositions which situate persons within the categories of 'being' and 'becoming'. Plath problematizes the relationship between the individual and the social field by highlighting and examining the formation of one by the other. Instead of binary
opposites, she draws for us an intertwined, complex, and shifting relationship of power and influence.

Her position is relentlessly antagonistic and dialectical. She not only rejects the status quo and its sanctioned identities, but traces that status quo's unconscious fabrications. The assertion of will costs her heroines any prospect of happy or supportive relationships (with men), and they grow to despise people in general. In "Lady Lazarus", relationships have been reduced to their function, and the body has been violently inscribed by culture, turned into a lamp shade. No fantasy lover or friendship liberates the poem. On the contrary, Plath portrays relations as a kind of consumption: Lady Lazarus will "eat men like air". Lady Lazarus 'finds herself' (again in a self-cancelling fashion) only by identifying with death itself.

Toni Salvidar and Susan Van Dyne make a similar point regarding the difficult position Plath's heroines occupy. Van Dyne observes that Lady Lazarus's "sense of herself seems to depend here on gaining recognition from the other" ("Fuelling" 140), so paradoxically and ironically she seeks validation and power by offering her body to the very audience she alienates, despises, and consumes. And Toni Saldivar finds, in the final two stanzas of "Stings" (1962), "[i]n spite of the grandeur of these lines, they contain hints of the ludicrous" and "echo a super-hero comic book" (175). Finding an adequate replacement
fantasy is not so easy or desirable a task for Plath as many of her critics would like to have it.

In fact, a group of Plath critics have dismissed her precisely because her poetry is depressive or manic, and because it expresses a fragmented conception of the self or consciousness. Much like the critics cited in the beginning of this chapter, these commentators desire a reassuring style that supports the status quo's vision of normality. In a typical attempt to contain Plath's discourse within the confines of the individual, Elizabeth Hardwick writes in "On Sylvia Plath" that in her "work and in her life the elements of pathology are so deeply rooted and so little resisted that one is disinclined to hope for general principles, sure origins, applications, or lessons" (100). Anne Stevenson reiterates both this containment of Plath in the individual (as mental 'case') and the desire for a norm. In the biography Bitter Fame (1989), she writes that Plath's Ariel poems "are bereft of all normal 'human' feeling" and "reveal the murderous projections of this psychic state onto others" (270). Similarly, David Holbrook in Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence (1976) sees what he describes as her theoretical "inversion of appropriate feeling" and promotion of "disgust in the reader" as belonging "to weakness not strength" (252). As with previous critics, he looks for the "appropriate" which is not "weakness".

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All of which fails to take into account how Plath's poetry is precisely an attempt, not to act out her own pathological condition, but to pathologize the various categories that go into constructing the so-called norm or status quo (individualism, marriage, Woman, Nature, ...) Plath looks at the world as a structuralist might. And in doing so, she is bound to alienate those critics who desire a place in her poems wherein they can identify. Holbrook goes on to use such words as "psychotic", "hysterical", "flip", "offensive", "absurd", and "pathological" to denigrate her poetry: which goes to show that he and many others grasp her poetic effect but not its implications. Even Hugh Kenner labels her poetry as "insidious nausea" ("Arts" 76) and "bogus spirituality" ("Arts" 77) composed "somewhere on the far side of sanity" ("Sincerity" 43), while P. N. Furbank reviews it as "sick verse" (73) and "hysterical bravado" (74). Again, Irving Howe condemns the poetic voice that emerges in Ariel for being "unmodulated and asocial" (233). In one sweeping dismissive gesture, John Malcolm Brinnin asserts that "a shriek maintained for eighty-five pages becomes, to say the least, a bore" (79). For these critics who follow the mandates of New Criticism, a poet does not leave the world in a state of chaos, but is someone who "has 'come to terms' with his experience" (Brooks 207), someone who "triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern" (Brooks 214)
which is the poem. For these critics, then, Plath's "unmodulated" voice runs at cross purposes with 'good' poetry. A 'good' poet would not simply show the disorder of the world, but would iron out its wrinkles and order its fragmented parts.

As with those feminists who need to validate her by making her beautiful, whole, and decidedly transformed, these opposing critics seek to prove her illegitimacy by foregrounding the un-whole "schizoid division in herself" (Holbrook 267), as if they, like the Maslowians, could not bear to see the patchwork, splits, and political conflicts in the world. It is safer to see conflict and disunity originating in a single individual, or 'mind'. One has to work hard to keep Plath situated in a larger context, to see her tracing the threads that sew cultural fantasies together. As the above critics show, consciousness of fabrication, disunity, the motivated quality of language and fantasy is unpalatable.

What makes Plath different particularly from other women poets struggling with the same issues is her exploration, handling and manipulation of fantasy and her refusal to find refuge in any traditional categories of individualism, a refusal which leaves her openly confronting the social world. Although, as Ostriker writes, "the most visionary of [women's] works appear to be strengthened by acknowledging division and containing it, as H.D. says, 'in my thought here'" ("Thieves"
29), these poets still acknowledge the existence of a self--be it a divided self. On the other hand, in Plath's exploration of the severed consciousness, far from fusing the division, her awareness causes further alienation from the self to the point where her heroines often lose any sense of being. The self is nothing; but not "Nobody" as Emily Dickinson describes herself. When Dickinson asserts "I'm Nobody!" (c.1861), not a "dreary . . . Somebody", followed by the question "Who are you?", "Nobody" becomes an identity--her identity which she invites others to take as their own and join her in this common likeness: "Are you--Nobody--too? / Then there's a pair of us?"

Similarly, the speaker of Anne Sexton's " Consorting with Angels" (1966) complains, "I was tired of being a woman, . . . tired of the gender of things", and so decides somehow to abandon her "common gender and [her] final aspect"; and yet, she too does not lose herself. In her dream fantasy, which is self-consciously and defiantly "thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason", she is "not a woman any more / not one thing or the other", but both man and woman. For Sexton, the divided self fuses into her reformed, almost divine, identity ("I'm no more a woman / than Christ was a man"), as it does for Adrienne Rich in her poetry. The speaker of Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" (1972) dives directly into the wreck that is her submerged self to discover that "I am she: I am he", that she is in fact a "we", both the mermaid and the
merman. Unlike Plath's, these metaphors create unity and focus upon the possibility of a recoverable interior self.

Plath has no substantial "I"\textsuperscript{12} to call "nothing"; she negates any feeling of 'self-presence' which might turn attention away from those exterior, formative structures. Hence, she never acknowledges self, always undercuts or cancels out its identities. Plath refused to take refuge, to her own psychic detriment, in any sort of protective self-fantasy. By the end of her life and her writing, she becomes, as we read in "Edge", (5 Feb. 1963) "the woman", never "I". She laments in "Tulips": "I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself", and she has succeeded. She sees herself as "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow". And even when she (and we) identifies herself as the queen bee, she never assuredly makes the identification. In "Stings" she insists, "I / Have a self to recover, a queen", but the queen is still something she describes and observes from a distance: "Is she dead, is she sleeping? / Where has she been . . . ?" Whenever she plays at being these various characters in any case, she does so fleetingly or, if done with determination, sarcastically as we observe in "Lady Lazarus" or even "Daddy".

Plath moves from poem to poem adopting various disguises, from magician's daughter to female Lazarus or a queen

\textsuperscript{12} Of course on a literal level we do read an "I" in her poems. My point is that this "I" tends to lack a strong individual identity. The "I" often fuses with, or is lost in, the environment, as we will see later in this chapter.
bee, or a beekeeper or the Jewish daughter of a Nazi father, and so forth. Unlike the personae of the confessional poets with whom she has been associated (Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, etc.), Plath's personae are blatantly fictional, not 'realistic'. In short, she may feel like these characters, but she is obviously not them, and can never actually be them, at least not for long.

Jacqueline Rose suggests that "Plath reveals the internal impossibility of this conception of selfhood" (my emphasis 144), meaning the "concept of an 'authentic female selfhood'"(144) of the Lady Lazarus variety. But every notion of self seems under devastating scrutiny in Plath's later poetry; in fact, her greatest poetry emerges from her exhausting resistance to any natural or cultural conception of the self which would underplay the existence of a formative social ground. Thus, just as Plath's fantastic roles are somehow inadequate, so her 'real life' characters feel alienated and unsupported. In exploring the role of wife, the dominant emotions toward her husband are bitterness, resentment, and hatred. In "The Jailer", he is an "indeterminate criminal"; she has "been drugged and raped". Husband and wife never actually communicate. In fact, in "The Detective", she disappears altogether, "a case without a body." In the role of daughter, she portrays a hostile relationship with her father--one so excessively dramatic that it has been described (first by Mary Lynn Broe) as comic.
When she plays at being a daughter in "Daddy", her insistent baby talk or repetitive nursery rhyme style ("You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe") proves itself forced, somehow all too much.

But even among her agreeable or loving relationships, the dominant mood is ambivalence. In "Morning Song" (19 Feb. 1961), in her role as mother--perhaps the most unacceptable of reductions--she expresses a defamiliarizing distance from her child and from the process of gestation and birth:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry Took its place among the elements.

To her, the infant is like a "New Statue. / In a drafty museum," while she and her husband "stand round blankly as walls." In other words, the child is born straight into a hardened role, a prefabricated fantasy, thrown into a social world which makes interiors from the outside in. Reinforcing her sense of helpless disconnectedness, she comically describes herself stumbling "from her bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown", and finally concludes:

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own
Effacement at the wind's hand.

In "By Candlelight" (24 Oct. 1962), she again undercuts her maternal role as she feeds what she imagines to be a "Balled hedgehog / Small and cross." Although in "Nick and the Candlestick" (29 Oct. 1962) her child is lovingly "the baby in the barn" to her, she still wonders at its separateness and beginning: "O love, how did you get here? / O embryo". In these cases, Plath foregrounds both the violent potential of the world in forming the fragile consciousness, as well as the parent's--as primary representative of the social--predilection to harden the child into an object, an alien, ("statue", "embryo") whose destiny is to play the role of some serviceable surface (a "blank wall" perhaps) in the world. Again, the above is a good example of Plath's brilliance, which is to have shifted the focus from recovering individualism or self-actualization to the formative fields of the social which rule subjectivity.

Hence, Plath's style sometimes mimics and parodies the boredom and/or the violence of the style of technological culture. Most noteworthy, feelings, like roles, become less human or natural and more mechanical. The presence and force of culture's mechanical style is foregrounded in a poem like "Daddy", where the reader is slammed by the repeated "ich, ich, ich", "do, do, do" and "you, you, you" sounds until--in a transformation of Gertrude Stein's observations--the words
take on new meanings: only now the repetitions also signify the mechanical style's numbing of perceptions. Such mechanical, bullet-like repetition gradually exposes the speaker's explosive repulsion of the self and the other without explicitly naming those feelings: even though "The tongue stuck in my jaw", the German "I" or "ich" becomes (as it sounds like) a disgusted "ick, ick, ick", as it more violently connotes a repeated "kick". By more obviously omitting another "k"--the one from "Gobbledygook"--Plath emphasizes the stickiness ("goo") of the word. Likewise, the "do's" of "You do not do, you do not do", along with the repetition of "do" throughout the poem, may eventually sound like "doo-doo" in a type of repulsed infantile naming of something "not very pure or true", but opaque and mechanical, "the language obscene" or culturally constructed.

How the self and the so-called private are socially constructed is a concern of such modern women poets as Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes suggests that Plath "shares with Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell the central experience of shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one" (qtd. in Kroll 2). In "Self in 1958" (June 1958-June 1965) Sexton's declarations, "I am a plaster doll; I pose", "I live in a doll's house", "They think I am me!" parallel Plath's own constant reexaminations, redefinitions and reassertions of self, from "I don't know a thing" ("Face Lift"), "I have lost
myself I am sick of baggage" ("Tulips") to "I am the sun" ("The Surgeon at 2 a.m."). "I am a lake" ("Mirror" 23 Oct. 1961), "I am myself. That is not enough" ("The Jailer"), "I / Am a pure acetylene / Virgin" ("Fever 103" 20 Oct. 1962), "I / Am the arrow" ("Ariel" 27 Oct. 1962), "I am a miner" ("Nick and the Candlestick"), "I am red meat" ("Death & Co." 14 Nov. 1962).

Sexton can be just as obsessed with the 'self' and the lack of 'self', and just as suicidal in her thoughts as Plath. However, whereas Sexton, along with Lowell and Rich, more readily finds some sort of unifying resolution, Plath's aborted attempts at locating an adequate sustaining fantasy leave the self and body exposed with all the patches and seams, tattoos and scars visible to the eye; if Plath has any self, it is perhaps this style which is characterized by its insistent turning of everything inside out. Sexton is less willing to denaturalize all roles, or to defuse the spell of fantasy--of self-coherency. Susan Van Dyne points out, for example, that while Sexton's "All My Pretty Ones" (1962) and Lowell's "Life Studies" (1956) expose the poets' unsatisfactory, fault-ridden fathers, the fathers are finally forgiven in the last stanzas of the poems "by the equally flawed children" (Revising 52). On the other hand, Plath's final thought in "Daddy", "you bastard, I'm through", shuts out any future forgiveness or familial resolution or even the
possibility of life without pain. Any closure here is closure without resolution.

The absence of closures and smooth narratives, or rather her parodic mimicking of culture's own style of dismembering compartmentalization, often results in a jarring poetic opacity. Plath's poetic style is opaque compared to these other poets' transparent telling of events. Judith Kroll seems to be getting at this idea when she writes that the strategy of the confessional poets "depends partly upon convincing the reader of a lack of... detachment" (my emphasis 3). For me, the result of their "convincing the reader" is a transparent style. Sexton's "Cripples and Other Stories" (Oct. 1965), for instance, echoes "Daddy"'s nursery rhyme cadence, and yet Sexton delivers more of a straight-forward narrative, whereas Plath attempts to express immediate or recollected feelings which produce fantastic associations and sounds. While Plath rawly addresses "Daddy", dramatizing what are often repressed, interiorized emotions, Sexton discusses "My Doctor" and "My father" with a sense of distance and narrative smoothness which contain the poem, and give the reader a voice to identify with. In "Those Times..." (June 1963), Sexton ominously announces: "I will speak of the little childhood cruelties," and then follows with--as Jon Rosenblatt describes it--"only vague references" (160) to her childhood. She delivers to us a transparent and ironically detached story, considering the confessional poets' strategy.
This is not the case with Plath, as the critical responses have shown, with Kroll trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again and other critics sweeping the pieces away.

One of the most intriguing reversals within Plath's ongoing grounding and denaturalizing of cultural myths is her exteriorization of madness, in particular psychosis. (She senses the world's collective fantasies absorbing her into indistinctness, moulding her into another "Sheep in Fog" 2 Dec. 1962, 28 Jan. 1963. As we will see, her personae respond to the psychotic situation by insisting on distinctness from their surroundings—as in the "Red / Scar in the sky, red comet" ["Stings"]—some vantage point from which to keep a sense of her own consumption by the busy work of the cultural hive). Arguably, Plath finds insanity not in the isolated consciousness and unconsciousness of afflicted souls, but first and foremost in the texture of the culture. Consequently, she reads madness as embedded in the patriarchy itself, and not inside her mind. Contrary to the critics' understanding, Plath's world is psychotic, depressed, and angry first, and only secondarily does the self take up the culture's prefabricated guises.

For Plath, those guises, so easily donned in the early poetry, lose their reassuring coherence. In a gesture perhaps too shocking for many of her critics (those searching for authenticity and those searching for madness), Plath
dramatically rewrites the deceptively individualized body as the social body, individual mind as social text. (One of the achievements of Plath's late poetry is to break through what Sartre calls "seriality", which is to say she breaks out of that sense of social anonymity, forming a gestalt of group life where before there were only isolated minds, in isolated spaces, surrounded by white picket fences). In her late poems, the body bursts on the scene so that we do not focus on the imaginary unity of the body, but on the various cultural inscriptions, signs, scars, tattoos.

By contrast, a close look at the early poetry (before 1961) reveals an assured poetic consciousness overlooking a seamless, enchanted world. Plath tends to construct fairy tale nature scenes, rustic landscapes, and melodramatic encounters. She relies heavily on the language of myth (Persephone, Daphne, fauns, dryads), royalty (kingdoms, monarchs, queens, lords and ladies) and more than anything, fairy tales (witches, ghosts, trolls, rooks, dragons, "Tinker Jack"'s exotic and personified animals and insects). In the process, she develops a richly detailed nature combined with a highly poeticized, archaic vocabulary ("wassail" ["The Glutton" 1956], "susurrus" and "viols" ["Alicante Lullaby" 1956], "lutes" ["Conversation Among the Ruins" 1956], "midden" ["Vanity Fair" 1956], "mead", "fell" and "girt" ["Bucolics" 1956], etc.), which helps create an otherworldly atmosphere, sometimes reminiscent of Andersen (for example, "Ella Mason
and her Eleven Cats" 1956) or even Beatrix Potter (for example, "Faun" 1956). Plath's poetic line also helps maintain the sense of an archaic, enchanted world in the way she backs into her sentences after the fashion of an older poetics: "Through portico of my elegant house you stalk" ("Conversation Among the Ruins"); "Born green we were" ("Firesong" 1956); "Through fen and farmland walking" ("Song for a Summer's Day" 1956); "Two girls there are . . ." ("Two Sisters of Persephone" 1956); "At the essential landscape stare . . ." ("November Graveyard" 1956). The poetic inversion of these lines tells us 'this is a rich poetic universe'.

The language of her later work is, by comparison, obscenely direct. For example, compare the mythical artificiality of the early poems to the more colloquial, personal, and direct opening lines of "Cut" (24 Oct. 1962):

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

Here Plath offers a raw snapshot image that is rare in her early works. It is almost as if her style had finally come to grips with the homogenizing styles of modern technological culture, as the image is transformed into a mechanical one:

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the organic "onion" or human "thumb" is fashioned into "a sort of hinge". The poem's pared down quality, its lack of poetic devices, simile, metaphor, personification, and even descriptive adjectives, and the sense of a regular rhythm, firmly situates it in the modern world as opposed to the removed poetic space of her earlier work. Likewise, the short lines, frequent line breaks, and monosyllabic words create a staccato-like rhythm which again evokes the mechanization of the speaker, of the self.

Of course Plath's late work is also rich in fantasy images; the main difference is that the early fantasy world is complete--consistently otherworldly. It is not freakishly juxtaposed with the banality and violence of the real world. The early poetry is not a part of history or culture, but is timeless and magical; as in the tames of fairy tales, one cannot imagine the permanence of death, the oppressiveness of boredom, or the complex banality of marital conflict. Plath's language, even where there is danger, conjures an underlying plenitude of meaning and richness of experience. The personae describe ideal fantasy unions with a receptive, beautiful and peaceful nature ("Song for a Summer's Day", "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" 1956), or else they observe the eternal harmony of nature ("Southern Sunrise" 1956, "Prospect" 1956), and sometimes even the 'ugliness' of others ("The Glutton", "Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats"), but always from a safe distance which fails to implicate the omniscient poetic consciousness.
Plath delivers "steady thought", the fastiduous control, clarity, union and closure that critics feel deprived of in her later poetry.

Whereas even the few lines quoted from "Cut" are enough to convey Plath's later discomfort in the world, the earlier works reveal either a sense of joyful integration with the fantasy world (as "I" or "we") or, sometimes, godlike detachment. In "Song for a Summer's Day", the persona and her "own country love" walk "together, talking, / Through Sunday's honey-air", at one with a reassuringly benign nature, while in pieces as different as "Prospect" (1956) and "Two Sisters of Persephone" the poet speaks from some omniscient position. In her later bee poems, however, Plath suddenly becomes acutely and painfully aware both of her involvement and alienation in a precarious 'nature', a nature--once an idyllic psychic and external paradise--now thoroughly infected with the signs of culture. Part of the shock of the later poetry is its insistence on the uncontrollability, from the viewpoint of the ego, of the social ground. Instead of massaging the psyche, culture appears to capsize it or, as in "Cut", dismember the unified body image. The early poetry, along with its sense of integrity between persona and enchanted world, also, in one illuminating instance, fantasizes a godlike subjectivity.

13 On a personal level in Plath's mind, the 'natural' bees and bee hives may have had a particularly strong symbolic association with patriarchal control since her own father, whom she resented for his domineering manner, studied bees.
Admittedly "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" (1956) is meant to amuse. But its images also deeply satisfy the reader's desire for security and wholeness. Plath's persona imagines she is god, in Stevenesque fashion. The "I" begins as a question mark, but it must be rhetorical since its later manifestations are not thrown into doubt:

I
Make houses shrink
And trees diminish
By going far; my look's leash
Dangles the puppet-people
Who, unaware how they dwindle,
Laugh, kiss, get drunk,
Nor guess that if I choose to blink
They die.

The "I", omnipotently in control, entirely determines her surroundings, inventing worlds:

I
When in good humour,
Give grass its green
Blazon sky blue, and endow the sun
With gold;
Yet, in my wintriest moods, I hold
Absolute power
To boycott color and forbid any flower
To be.

This "I" can, naturally, control any powers of others since she invented them to begin with ("All your beauty, all your wit, is a gift, my dear, / From me"). Obviously the piece, on one level, is done tongue in cheek. But "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" does bring into focus Plath's early preoccupations: inventing her own rich, enchanted worlds and foregrounding her role as creator (especially given her neon announcement of the poetic language). The outside world, in this piece and generally in the early poetry, is not allowed to intrude. The self (author, "I") controls her reality; although, the cliché sensibility places her fantasy world, her self-presence, within a larger cultural mythology, one in which all beings are, conveniently, fully responsible for themselves.

"Two Sisters of Persephone" draws out the implicit conservativism of Plath's mythology, and suggests that mythology's indebtedness to the real world. In this poem Plath describes two females, one associated with culture and the other associated with nature. The "girl" who "works problems on / A mathematical machine" is "no woman": she is "dry", "barren", "Rat-shrewd", "Root-pale", and "meager"; "Turned bitter and sallow as any lemon, . . . wry virgin to the last, . . . with flesh laid waste". Plath finally must
insist on returning this 'spinster' or 'old maid' to body, to a "wry" (i.e., distorted, twisted, contorted, crooked) nature, in much the same way that Byron, for example, could only imagine his friendship with the "mathematical" Annabella Milbanke (whom he called "The Princess of Parallelograms") "without one spark of love on either side", which he assumed must "lead to coldness on one side, and aversion on the other" (Byron, in his Journal, 30 November 1813). Plath supports sexual stereotypes and delivers a moralizing tale which extols the pregnant lady (both in and out of the poem) while condemning the Other. The language of plenitude is reserved for the pregnant woman, who "Grows quick with seed. / Grass-couched in her labor's pride, / She bears a king." The language creates a satisfying sense of wholeness which encourages the reader to identify or eye the 'pregnant' (natural, and even "Gold"!) woman.

Plath ridicules such stereotyping in later poems like "The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Applicant" by ironically stereotyping women, including herself, exposing their disadvantaged condition and position. All the poems composed after 1961 mark a significant change in her relationship with nature, self, and others. (One can easily imagine that as she grew to regard her fairy tale marriage as a farce, fabricated no less from her own desires, she began to feel the incompatibility between her previous fantasies and the constructive reality of real institutions). 'Nature' can no
longer repress its own creation by culture, or less dramatically, worldliness can no longer be kept at bay; the fantasy of Nature no longer coheres: it splits apart, along with Plath's own vision of ego and body.

The intrusion of culture causes the turn away from a cyclical sense of time, or a sense of timelessness and broad identifications, to a sharper detailing of the historical. In "All the Dead Dears" (1957), for example, the persona reflects ("This lady here's no kin / Of mine, yet kin she is . . .") upon a fourth century A.D. skeleton:

All the long gone darlings: they
Get back, though, soon,
Soon: be it by wakes, weddings,
Childbirths or a family barbecue:

Although the speaker considers a woman's death and her relation to it, her large, cyclical musings never give way to particularizing on women's position. Her thoughts on death are reassuring in their evocation of continuity, a continuity echoed in the poem's repetition of the word "soon", which smoothly links one sentence, and one time period with another.

In Plath's later poems, however, culture permeates her once impermeable, enchanted world. Nature no longer functions as a protective layer that keeps the 'real' world out; fantasies are no longer free of the desires of the (social)
others. Nature does play a big part in the bee poems, but these later poems highlight the heavy demands of culture. Significantly, the bee poems, for the first time in Plath's work, shift from otherworldly details to cultural objects. She describes the beekeepers' smocks, and the manufactured housing, feeding, and caring of the bees. This also describes, of course, her father's world since he was a researcher of bees. Personally, for Plath, the world of the bees and the demands of her father mirror the demands imposed on her by a larger patriarchy, so that her image of her father that once seemed to protect her from the social world now draws her into it. In other poems, plugs, lenses, cables, swastikas, rubber crotches, rubber breasts and other manufactured or cultural objects brutally, radically displace the "beckon[ing]" "royal dreams" ("The Shrike" 1956) of her early poetic fantasy world. This is not to suggest that the settings of her later poems are not also fairy tale-like. Both the queen bee's and Lady Lazarus's ritualistic transformations and resurrections inhabit the world of fantasy; nevertheless, these new fictional characters are grafted onto (contaminating and contaminated by) a chaotic, collaged vision of reality, wherein a benign nature is uprooted by a violent, manipulative culture whose language is not neutral but armed. Nature and myth lose their imaginary unity and become highly motivated symbols.
In her 1961 transitional poems, nature appears less safe, less removed from culture, as in "Blackberrying" (23 Sept. 1961) where she combines the banal with the magical in a phrase such as "phantom laundry"; or in "Stars Over the Dordogne" (1961) where there enters a note of domestic drudgery, with its "scrubbed" stars. Or more severely, consider how the new tone of "Finisterre" (29 Sept. 1961) invades the romance of the early poems. The title sounds romantically exotic; but, in keeping with a shift in tone, it also echoes "sinister", and suggests an ultimate limit (finis, end + terre, land). The fantasy world of "Finisterre" includes pain, disease, body distortion, and worse, modern culture. She confronts the finisterre:

... the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic,  
Cramped on nothing. Black  
Admonitory cliffs, and the sea exploding  
With no bottom, or anything on the other side of it,  
Whitened by the faces of the drowned.

The persona's body is also affected by an external hostility, the dead, who can perhaps now be taken as signs of history's weight, and who impinge upon her:

The mists too are part of the ancient paraphernalia--  
Souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea.
They bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them.

They go up without hope, like sighs.
I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton,
When they free me, I am beaded with tears.

The enchanted fantasy has dissolved or rather has been resituated in history. For example, the word "paraphernalia" sticks out. It sounds too modern for her old enchanted world. The OED defines it as "personal belongings; equipment, accessories, appurtenances, etc." It is as if the effect of her old fantasies has worn off and she now recognizes her vocabulary, now put forth that vocabulary as device, technique, "equipment" for her fantasy apparatus. It ostensibly refers to "mists", but would just as well apply to any of her myths, such as her mythic Ladies, sailors, witches, and princesses. She explicitly associates that paraphernalia with the "paraphernalia" of commercial exchange: "postcard stalls", and manufactured "toy ladies".

Plath's foregrounding of "mists" does not seduce the reader into her old world, where a mysterious mist would be perfectly at home. Rather, she divests "mists" and her fictional universe of its magic. It is interesting to note that the other meaning of "paraphernalia" has to do with contracts and ownership: "articles of personal property that law allowed married woman to keep and treat as her own". If
The commercial and the technical rupture the spell of Plath's fantasy, they also bring with them a corresponding existential despair, a sense of lack: the old magic does not make sense any more. The earlier vision which allowed for omniscience and unity in a world ripe with meaning shifts to a diminutive and passive image of herself as a "thin, silly message", "mailed into" the emptiness of "space" ("Wuthering Heights" Sept. 1961). Nature does not work as it did before. "Stars Over the Dordogne" insists that something is "not right" about the season. The stars, though "scrubbed and self-assured" are also "wanned, dulled", silent, sparse, "puritan and solitary", if not altogether "lost". The stars in the sky are cold, flat, unemotional, consuming or to be consumed:

Nor do they send up fires where they fall
Or any signal of distress or anxiousness.
They are eaten immediately by the pines.

The older fantasy clearly fails to cohere, contributing to the angst-ridden mood of the overall texture of the transitional poems. (This despair looms large perhaps because Plath has not yet learned to reinvent and resituate her fantasy world.)

Nature is not itself at all, but a projection of her state of mind, a mind which is also not itself, since it belongs first and foremost, as we saw earlier, to a cultural "paraphernalia". Disturbingly, nature and culture, or more
accurately culturized nature (the stars hang like "mathematical problems"), is disorientingly unpredictable or unreadable (or the readings do not turn up the underlying magical meanings). Sometimes the stars are "plain and durable"; other times they are "timid" or "orphaned" and "lost"; they then feel distressed and anxious by the surrounding towers (of pines).

One of the qualities of Plath's angst at this time involves the absorption of self into an exterior environment; now the fictions of the past are part of an oppressive cultural weight. "Wuthering Heights", alluding to the great romance by Emily Brontë, puts a sting into literary fancy of unbridled passion and romance. In Brontë's novel, Catherine, overwhelmed by her attraction and love for Heathcliff, declares to Nelly, "I am Heathcliff". Heathcliff represents, here, the passionate and the wild, and could have evoked for Plath Ted Hughes who also lived in the Wuthering Heights area. Somewhat like Catherine,14 Plath becomes sucked into this Other who represents not only nature, but also an entire social (patriarchal) body. Plath's poem presents a world that is seductive, alluring, and hypnotic, but also capable of annihilating subjectivity, sucking the psyche into a gray homogeneity. Although the persona "step[s] forward" into a

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14 I say "somewhat" because Catherine's "becoming" Heathcliff is more of a positive, romantic union than it is a loss of self, as seems to be the case in Plath's poem.
nature that "might warm" her and that appears to hold "a series of promises" for her, such hopes "only dissolve and dissolve" like the "always unstable" horizon of "pale sky".

More significantly, it is not simply her hopes that dissolve; she senses her own self "evaporate" into a space. The image sounds more violent and painful than benign: "The horizons ring me like faggots" as if she is being burned at the stake, turned to ash and dust. One body blends into the Other: the sheep (a well-worn symbol of the social) "browsing in their dirty wool-clouds" are as "Gray as the weather". The individual body in "Wuthering Heights" is not allowed its own space or its own unique being; the sheep--the persona is destined to melt into their (social) body--do not have their own shape. They blend into their cloudy surroundings, gray on gray. The sheep's fluid shapelessness is seen as a trap, as Plath writes that "They stand about in grandmotherly disguise".

To carry the analogy of sheep to society, from their own viewpoint they embody order, not assimilation and control. Just as nature itself may appear reasonable and orderly, so culture appears reasonable and orderly, "mature" and "steady": "The sheep know where they are", following a dictated pattern. Unfortunately for the heroine, they fuse with the weather, and she fuses into them: "The black slots of their pupils take me in." The sheep fuse with the gray landscape, and she is enfolded within that fusion, doubly alienated. She is drawn
into the sheep's eyes (which are like slots in a mailbox), caught in a new spell (adopting their point of view?): "It is like being mailed into space".

The similarity here between Plath's persona and the position of the psychotic as suggested by Roger Caillois is uncanny. In his article "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1984), Caillois differentiates the insect's facility to mimic and blend into its environment from the psychotic's inability to locate himself or herself in a position in space:

It is with represented space that the drama becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself. (28)

So, too, the speaker of the poem feels "unhinged", floating like a "thin, silly message" in empty space. She feels an overwhelming pressure to "dissolve and dissolve" into the wholeness of nature/culture: "The sky leans on me, me," like a

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heavy burden.\textsuperscript{16} This dislocation poses a threat to the subject's identity and even sanity:

The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surrounding, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined . . . (Caillois 28)

In the poem, "the wind / Pours by like destiny," enveloping and determining all existence, and "bending / Everything in one direction" stripping away uniqueness and personality: "I can feel it trying / To funnel my heat away." She fears the allure of assimilation to the group's imperative to become another well-ordered sheep:

If I pay the roots of the heather
Too close attention, they will invite me

\textsuperscript{16} This overwhelming feeling of fusion with something external to the self may sound like such cosmic, mystical, or visionary experiences as Wordsworth's "spots of time" (The Prelude Book XII, 1850), or Rilke's "moments of exaltation" (Duino Elegies 1923), or Freud's "oceanic feeling" (Civilization and its Discontents 1930). However, while the above represent positive, emotional sensations of self-possession, the images described by Plath and Caillois are, by contrast, negative and alienating; instead of dissolving into a oneness with outside elements, the persona disappears into a void or literal darkness.
To whiten my bones among them. The surrounding space consumes her sense of self. Caillois describes this as "depersonalization by assimilation to space" (30):

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them. . . . It ends by replacing them. . . . He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. (30)

Without a sense of subjectivity, the person has no perspective on the world. Much of Plath's later emphasis on difference or distinction has less to do with creating an authentic self, than countering the homogenizing capacity of her world.

It is important to note, in light of some of the critical responses to her work, that Plath is not psychotic; she writes perceptively of a maddening situation in an exterior space. The madness is in the world itself, in the world's insistence on programmatic absorption. In this overly demanding fantasy world, as opposed to her earlier fantasy world, the persona has no controlling distance, no desirable role. On the contrary, she loses any perspective on experience to such an extent that the sounds/language she hears (along with the
words on the page) become thing-like: the sheep become "All wig curls and yellow teeth / And hard, marbly baas." 17

Finally, the poem turns explicitly to face the cultural which is experienced as constricting, intransigent, and commercial: "the house lights / Gleam like small change." The piece depicts only shrinking horizons: "withering" means withering; and, in the same vein, she writes, reversing the earlier rich, magic of nature that "There is no life higher than the grasstop / Or the hearts of sheep". Any sense of future "change" is "small". While Plath begins to turn her attention to the social world, finding in it an alienated community, the understanding of both oppression and psychic construction is still somewhat abstractly drawn. The late works are far more directly grounded in the minutiae of day-to-day life, far more involved in the cultural production of reality/fantasy.

Turning now to provide more extensive readings of specific poems, I start with "In Plaster", a transitional poem, and Plath's most explicit portrayal of the divided self. Alicia Ostriker cites "In Plaster" as "the most brilliant

17 John P. Muller argues in "Language, Psychosis, and the Subject in Lacan" that in "the psychotic state, there is no distance or perspective on experience, there is no 'cut', no repression, and therefore no true signifier-signified relationship" (29). In Lacanian terms, the psychotic state is one "where words no longer serve to mediate relationships but function rather as objects" (27).
single split-self poem of our time" (Stealing 81), and one which displays that "self-division is culturally prescribed, wholeness culturally forbidden to the woman and the poet" (83). From this point (and this poem) we may trace Plath's progressive sense of self-annihilation and her growing understanding of the social world as psychotic. My goal is to insist on Plath's break with the self as origin, or self presence, or refuge, to insist that her poetry resituates subjects along the surface of the public, social world. Moreover, Plath not only rejects the illusory autonomy of the individual, but also the containing autonomy of the private. Her power comes from always resituating the private and the individual within a larger formative context.

Ostriker writes how recent women poets (she focuses on Margaret Atwood, Diane Wakoski, and Anne Sexton) similarly work to dismantle masculine authority: "Depicting the patriarchal male as lover, hero, father, and God, the poems use a broad array of anger-generated devices to demystify, attack and ridicule him and the cultural script he embodies" (Stealing 150). Atwood, in particular, seems akin to Plath: "As a satirist, Atwood is unusual in that she is equally contemptuous of the lover and the self" (151), as is Plath who often will draw her heroines as complicit victims, as we will see. Atwood resembles Plath in the way she destabilizes assumptions about the self. Ostriker explains that in the collection Power Politics (1971) "Atwood's style encourages no
suspension of disbelief, no illusion of illusionlessness; these are, she makes clear, her poems, her nightmares, her definitions of 'I' and 'You' and her 'distortions of you'" (152). However, whereas Atwood's project, in such poems as "Hesitations outside the door" (1971), is to undermine cultural assumptions through exposing male/female relationships for what they are, Plath goes on to show the actual cultural production of the self.
Ch. 2: Moving the Self Into the World

In her late poems, Plath firmly grounds her speakers in a complex dialogue with linguistic, imaginary, and cultural others. The idea of an address or a dialogue is important in Plath's work, for in the world of her poems, the possibility of communication has disappeared within an overly formal and mechanized culture. Her personae have already turned into, or are in danger of being turned into "statues"—frozen, stereotyped, speechless. Plath's goal is to document and awaken the frozen statues which populate her world through a sometimes explosive interrogation.

Most significantly, Plath instigates dialogue in the public arenas: archives, market places, hospitals, or beaches. She does not attempt to contain the world according to the private powers of mind. Even her so-called private worlds—home, marriage, family—are for Plath already scripted by collective forces, so that private relationships and the interior regions of the self belong to an open, public stage. There is no real privacy in her poetic worlds. Everything and everyone—in uneven positions of power—circulate within an oppressive, homogenizing system. This explains, in part, why Plath's poetry is so painful to read: she offers no refuge from the public glare.

In comparison to many of her contemporaries, Plath affords no escape for the self from the demands of the surface
of the world. For example, Adrienne Rich's powerful *Diving into the Wreck* also interrogates self and culture ("the wreck"), trying to get beyond normalizing narratives and get to the bottom of things, to explore "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth". But Rich's diving metaphor salvages traditional notions of self as a deep interior full of conscious and unconscious treasures:

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this not like Cousteau with his assiduous team aboard the sun-flooded schooner but here alone.

For her image of self, Rich presents an adventurous explorer in search of undiscovered territory. The speaker is armed with aura-bearing objects: "the book of myths," "the camera," "the knife". She is also protected (in "body-armor"), detached from her environment, however dangerous it might be.
Rich's persona, here, reiterates the exhilarating vision of wholeness and power amidst danger expressed in her "Song" (1971):

If I'm lonely
it must be the loneliness
of waking first, of breathing
dawn's first cold breath on the city
of being the one awake
in a house wrapped in sleep

Whereas the persona in "Lady Lazarus" is transformed into a dead object, a lamp for another's use, Rich's speakers in "Song" and "Diving into the Wreck" are self-possessed: she ventures to her object, firmly in control of her language and her destiny:

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.

She even seems to possess a guiding phallus ("I stroke the beam of my lamp") which helps her to make transparent (as do her words/maps) her psychic environment and uncover valuable objects ("the treasures that prevail"). Plath's poetry is devoid of such treasures or pleasure. Her speakers' bodies do
not move freely through a fluid medium, in a state of curious detachment. Their bodies do not map, but are rather thoroughly mapped out, written, prescribed, unable to maintain much if any distance from their worlds. Instead of diving inside (the 'private' spaces of the home, the interior wellspring of the self), it is as if Plath dragged the wreck out of the water, investigating the history of its production, ownership and commodification, while at the same time trying to steal back what she can, dividing the given social discourse differently, enlarging her share of the language.

Charles Altieri, in *Enlarging the Temple* (1979), describes Robert Lowell's struggle with the secular, rationalized world in terms of an alienated self trying to "wrest from the flux some bases for value and a source of dignity" (64). Both Lowell, albeit very pessimistically, and Rich face the social world as if it were out there somewhere, at least to some degree a separate object to be examined, addressed, and explored. For Plath, by contrast, the self wakes up and discovers that there is no separation. The self is almost entirely construct, entirely a continuous extension of "the wreck" of modern culture. Or to put it another way, her personae discover that they are like collages, pasted together from various cultural images, objects, signifiers—and that these serve specific collective interests. Quite often in Plath's poems communication is not communication
between two people but between competing armies of images, objects, signifiers.

There are a few moments that escape absorption by her version of "the wreck" or what Lowell describes in "Beyond the Alps" as the "prose" world (itself a collage of logocentrism, commodification, patriarchy, and mechanization). But such moments are extremely brief. In "Magi" (1960), for example, Plath makes it clear that the innocence of the baby is already under siege by the signs of an abstract machinery that both colonizes the child and devalues her because she is female. This excellent and paradigmatic poem deserves to be quoted in full:

The abstracts hover like dull angels:
Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye
Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
Snow, chalk or suchlike. They're
The real thing, all right: the Good, the True--

Salutary and pure as boiled water,
Loveless as the multiplication table.
While the child smiles into thin air.

Six months into the world, and she is able
To rock on all fours like a padded hammock.
For her, the heavy notion of Evil

Attending her cot is less than a belly ache,
And Love the mother of milk, no theory.
They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato.
Let them astound his heart with their merit.
What girl ever flourished in such company?

This work illustrates Plath's relentless opposition of the
fragility and particularity of the human being against
impersonal beings ("the ethereal blanks") and the emotionless
discourses that organize the world ("multiplication table",
"theory", philosophy). These lines bring us to one of Plath's
essential points that from the point of view of abstraction
human being, human difference is a sort of stain to be
bleached: "Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye." The
intimate, the small (the baby, "a belly ache"), the ordinary
("laundry"), the qualitative ("Snow, chalk or suchlike") are
threatened here and elsewhere by Plath's greatest symbol of
assimilation: the erasing purity of "whiteness".

In The Passion of Emily Dickinson (1992), Judith Farr
tells us that in Dickinson's representations of "white", "she
was 'quoting' a whole tradition in religion as in poetry and
painting" (40). According to Farr, the "white" woman in Emily Dickinson's poetry (poems 271, 388, 325) describes the "mystic wedding of the nun" (34), "the divine bride" (34), "a sufferer" (35). "White" for Dickinson implies "enclosure, celibacy, commitment to self-denial" (36). It "signifies renunciation and retirement from society" (33) and "her contempt for trivia and falsehood" (35). Plath draws on the same tradition of "whiteness" and purity, but her stance towards it is obviously different. Plath regularly underscores the individual instance's (the nun's, bride's, sufferer's) connection with, and production by, social-historical systems. This is another reason why Plath transcends her own tendencies towards purity—i.e., idealizing Life, Nature, etc.; in her later works, these havens from culture are most often linked to collective forces, or reduced to signifiers.

Plath's method here, like Dickinson's, is to 'quote' a tradition. But her view of the tradition is negative, as she brings down heavenly 'purity' to earth, and human manipulations. Hence, Plath makes equivalent various, but related, discourses. She condenses the religious, scientific, philosophical, patriarchal discourses into a kind of oppressive family—elsewhere she adds technology, medical discourse, fashion, and history to the tribe. Each of these elements forms a collective cultural style which assimilates her speakers. The effect accumulating as one goes through her
work in its entirety. In "Magi", Plath opposes the fleshy value of the mother and the baby--at the same time specifying the girl child's devalued future--to the heady systems of the philosophers and moralists, in other words a patriarchal, public world.

But the shrinking, imaginary world of the mother "Attending her cot" cannot sustain its fragile light before the surrounding darkness. In other poems, Plath shows how the symbol of innocence already belongs to a worldly order. Elsewhere the figure of the child is presented not as a natural value, but a precious commodity: a "statue", a "fat gold watch" ("Morning Song"), or a "Pink-buttocked" cherub of a Botticelli painting ("Heavy Women" 26 Feb. 1961). In "Nick and the Candlestick" the womb-like night is compared to a mine, and the persona a miner of treasures (i.e., the child). The baby signifies both cultural capital and market values.

Not surprisingly, Plath resists the moment when the child will be ensnared once and for all into the matrices of the commodified world (the "notion of Evil"); she imagines at times some sort of childlike purity, as when she writes "Pure and clean as the cry of a baby" ("A Birthday Present"), or "What is so real as the cry of a child?" ("Kindness" 1 Feb. 1963), or:

The blood blooms clean
In you, ruby.

The pain

You wake to is not yours. ("Nick and the Candlestick")

But her language ("ruby") only underscores transience, the child's inevitable assimilation to culture and its threatening, purifying whiteness. In fact, even in "Magi", when the baby girl is still in an idealized state, she is already thinglike, claustrophobically bound up in cultural clothing, "like a padded hammock." If anything, Plath contemplates the extreme brevity of the baby as "nothing but life" (Collected Poems 290) before it is translated into "statue" or stereotype, circulating in the marketplace.

Plath, then, does not simplistically recount the fall from innocence into experience, purity to discourse. As we have seen, she is concerned about the particular kind of discourse that awaits the child. The position of the mother--mothering, caring, nursing--helps clarify this point. In "Candles" (17 Oct. 1960), "nurse" is a verb, something she does ("The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open"), an act of intimate caring, warm, human, close. This limited power/dialogue, however, does not extend into the worldly world. Such a nursing relationship--mother and child--is a slight one when viewed against the backdrop of the larger, rationalised world. We can see this larger world in Plath's more ominous and pervasive use of the sign "nurse". The
medical discourse places the woman in uniform, and confines her within the doctor/man's universe. Plath's dread, in particular for her female child, is a result of her anticipation of being positioned (inscribed, written, marked) as a silent statue, an unspeaking thing whose place it is to receive passively the word of the father; or as she puts it in "Barren Woman" (21 Feb. 1961), "Blank-faced and mum as a nurse." I will return to this subject, but note for now that one language of caring, which Plath associates with intimacy, the nursing mother, midwives, nurses, is replaced with a rationalised, impersonal form of caring illustrated by the figure of the nurses in the hospital. An intimate discourse is replaced with, or usurped by, a reified discourse.

"In Plaster" details and expands upon the tensions expressed in "Magi"—between particularity and universality, the inevitability of translation into discourse, the dispersed qualities of the self. In this poem, the worst has already happened; the self already belongs to discourse in general, and the "white" discourse (i.e., a condensation of the universalizing tendencies in modern culture) in particular. It should be added that "In Plaster" also emphasizes the specific historical limits placed on women who are idealized as static objects, rather than speakers or operators in the production of values. This strangely prosaic poem begins as follows:
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

In addition to the fact that the speaker insistently locates herself outside herself, Plath's lines seem to cross genres from lyric to prose, from the confession to ordinary public discourse. Unlike her other long lined poems ("Tulips," "Stars Over the Dordogne," "Blackberrying"), "In Plaster" denies one the usual pleasures of regular accent, beat, alliteration. Look, for example, at the first lines of "Stars over the Dordogne":

Stars are dropping thick as stones into the twiggy Picket of trees whose silhouette is darker Than the dark of the sky because it is quite starless.

The more or less regular iambic rhythm and the crisp effect of the alliteration (in particular of the "s", "t", and "k" sounds) immediately draw attention to the poem as poem, deforming normal language. "In Plaster", by contrast, borders on being shapeless, and discursive, perhaps emphasizing her subject: the deadening banality of a 'prose' world that no
longer values poetry, the pleasurable deformations of utilitarian language. But on the other hand, the prosaic line allows Plath to capture the speaker's struggle for shape, dialogue, perspective. From this point of view, the poem pushes language to the background in order to emphasize the presence of the speaker, thinking, or as if she were speaking about someone to a third party. In *Poetry as Discourse* (1983), Antony Easthope criticizes just such transcendentalist poetry which creates the illusion of a speaker who produces his or her discourse "as free agents" (28). Easthope argues that poetry should show that the speaker is produced by discourse, an effect of the signifier:

Two kinds of . . . subject position can be contrasted, one absolute, one relative. For the absolute position the subject is produced in discourse so as to deny that it is produced at all, to 'see' itself only as the transcendental ego. For a relative position the subject is produced with some degree of recognition that it is so produced, that the ego is determined by forces beyond itself on which it is dependent. (28)

Easthope's absolute subject, with its universal status and its denial of a dialogue between self and other could easily be called an 'absolutely white person' or self. Plath, like
Easthope, wants to recover processes of production of selfhood and find a place for what might be called different ("relative") subject styles. I would argue, then, that despite Plath's effecting the presence of the speaker in "In Plaster" that she is actually much closer to the "relative" subject position. For the speaker of "In Plaster" is really not a unified person but the personification of a signifier: the "yellow". Moreover, she is not just one signifier but two: "yellow" and "white." And finally these terms themselves have no stable identities, but refer to many other signifieds, as we shall see, so that selfhood here is a dialogue between two conflicting but connected fields ("yellow" and "white"). Plath, then, creates the effect of a unified speaker, while simultaneously pointing to a larger perspective which underscores productive symbolic networks.

Plath suggests the split, dialogic nature of being human at the very outset of the poem where the speaker is locked into a relationship ("I shall never get out of this!") or series of relationships which defines her being:

... she was shaped just the way I was

Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.
I couldn't sleep for a week, she was so cold.
I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer.
I couldn't understand her stupid behavior!
When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist.
Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:
She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages.

Plath emphasizes not self-unity or interiority but that the speaker is her multiple relationships ("This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one"). In fact, the speaker further eludes Easthope's sense of the transcendental subject by the sheer surrealism of the speaker: addressing a magical, shape shifting cast! Neither "yellow" nor "white" remain stable, let alone stable people. The "white", for example, like a condensed dream image attaches and detaches to "cast", "saint", "nurse", "mummy", "vase", "pacifist", "coffin", husband ("it was a kind of marriage"), and statue ("amazingly white torso"): a collage of cultural ideals and absolutes, voices which command or address the self, and call her to action.

The "white" field never speaks. The "yellow" projects and infers what the "white" is feeling or thinking ("she was so cold", "she was grateful", etc.). In a way it is as if the "yellow" field were learning how to address the signifier as signifier, to see it for what it is—a discourse—rather than identifying it or seeing it as a person. She begins trying to manipulate it, tap into its psychology ("I blamed her for everything"), but at the same time realizes that this is not to be that kind of dialogue. In order to deal with the
"white" force, she must desubjectivise it, realize that the "white" is "stupid", formulaic, mechanical. For Plath, the "white" self must be resituated (even in its particular instances), politicized, and seen as a collective 'voice'. This collective voice problematically echoes in and off the "yellow" self's being. The "white" self is culture, and Plath underscores how the yellow self is inseparable from this other, which informs her emotional and moral responses. As the "yellow" comes to realize, the other needs her too:

Without me, she wouldn't exist; so of course she was grateful.
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,
And it was I who attracted everybody's attention,
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had first supposed.
I patronized her a little, and she lapped it up—
You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality.

Here, Plath suggests a complex relation between "yellow" and "white", showing the one filtered through the other (of culture), as the "yellow" "Blooms out of" culture's body. Just as significantly, though, Plath tries to sustain a visible difference. Throughout "In Plaster", Plath balances the speaker's desire to identify and project onto the "white", with the "white"'s status as dumb object (cheap "porcelain,"
"cast", "mummy-case", "coffin", "dead body"). The persona in
the above lines is two fields, a fact which is lost on those
who see mainly a dialogue between a mother and a daughter (as
does Susan Van Dyne, for example). The "yellow" self has no
separate existence from its other (which includes all the
rules of behaviour, identifactory images, and discourses),
just as the "white" self is "stupid", a formula needing a
body, a subject in order to perpetuate itself ("Without me,
she wouldn't exist"). If one interlocutor dies, so does the
other. From this point of view what is at stake is the
"white" self's repression of "yellow"'s right to speak its
piece/difference. (Or to put it another way, the formulas of
the "white" discourse seek to limit the play of the "yellow"
field of signifiers, images, affects). I would emphasize the
automatic nature of the "white" self, its dumbness, rather
than its embodiment of a particular mother.

A word should be said about the imagery of the rose, one
of the more positive images in the poem—or in any of Plath's
later works! We might see the rose, not merely as nature,
certainly not pure nature, but as a sign of expression and
symbolic communication. For the rose, a living thing, is
nevertheless cultivated, uprooted from nature, and from its
associations of earthy Romanticism, every bit a 'sign' of
love, beauty, sympathy, erectness, ascension, etc. Moreover,
the rose alters the privilege of the cast in the cast/body
dichotomy. As rose, the speaker rises (arose) above and
outside the cast/vase's potential for trapping the self in a silent interior. Countering such a concealing discourse, this symbol imagines less of an imprisonment and more of an opening. Culture now pictured as a vase is not a sealed, complete whole, threatening to cover over her mouth and eyes/I's, but rather is meant to be an opening, a gap through which the rose can appear. This gesture insists not on a separation from nature, but on a space for expression and self-definition, voice and sign, underscoring the difference and connection between the cast and the body, the rose and the vase, the desires of the patient/woman over and above the desires of the doctor/male.

As with "Magi," Plath oververts the privileged terms--"white", "saint", "superior one"--by showing their dependence on their opposites. The "superior one", the pure, has no purpose ("Without me, she wouldn't exist") or point of contrast without the sick, "yellow", or "ugly and hairy". The notion of whiteness superiority and purity are for Plath made insidious things that feed on their opposites. At the same time, Plath reveals the origins of identification with such abstract idols:

I didn't mind her waiting on me, and she adored it.
In the morning she woke me early, reflecting the sun
From her amazingly white torso, and I couldn't help but notice Her tidiness and her calmness and her patience: She humored my weakness like the best of nurses, Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly. In time our relationship grew more intense.

While the speaker, like all human beings, is vulnerable, fragile, mortal, the image of the "white" being (like the transcendental ego) is "unbreakable", powerful ("reflecting the sun"), an object of fascination ("her amazingly white torso"). The "nurse" is unaffected, both psychologically ("calmness", "patience") and physically ("tidiness"), by the dangers of the word and the passing of time. Although the nurse reflects the patient's image ("shaped just the way I was"), she is hard and whole. This mirroring reflects the primordial situation of the mother and the child described by Lacan in his seminal essay on "the mirror stage". For Lacan, the child, helpless, uncoordinated, and dependent, comes to identify with the unity in the image of the parents (or a mirror image of itself). Such security is invested in the mirror so that it is seen by Lacan as the foundation or impetus behind all metaphors, idols, monuments, or schemes of wholeness that would freeze the chaos of reality into a moment of immortality. For Plath, something has to come between the
child and the mother, patient and nurse, worshipper and idol, for there to emerge any kind of mobility.

The patient's position resembles the baby's. Like Lacan's fictional baby—"sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence" (Écrits 2)—, she is unwhole, needy, broken, disintegrating, and hence ripe to identify with images of wholeness. But then in the fifth stanza, exactly midway through "In Plaster," just after presenting the nurse at her most glorious ("reflecting the sun"), Plath sharply divides speaker ("the yellow") from the ideal image ("the white"): She stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish.
I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself,
As if my habits offended her in some way.
She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.
And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces
Simply because she looked after me so badly.
Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.

Here, the ideal image itself begins to lose its unity; a split emerges between the appearance of unity and this unity's desire ("criticizing me in spite of herself" [my emphasis]), between the facade of immortality and mortality, between intense identity and separation (from "fitting me so closely"
to "offish"). The "white" no longer appears perfect (inhuman) or overwhelming, but rather mirrors the helplessness of the patient ("more and more absent-minded"). Plath seems to be exploring how a self is alienated or split apart from her particularity (body, fantasies, ideas) into pre-existent images, symbols, signifiers—the other's dreams for her. It should be reiterated that for Plath, these two regions are the self ("There are two of me now"); and throughout the poem she offers no ultimate point of separation from abstract ("white") system or language—although she certainly dreams of escape: "one day I shall manage without her".

Plath often shows how the self is thrown into system, frozen into images, statues. But here she is not simply anticipating the postmodern attitude towards subjectivity, that one is thrown into language, or that one finds one's identity in the other, etc. In "In Plaster", she is also commenting on the quality of the symbol, its specific motivations. After all, this nurse as ideal image, although she is associated with the "white"-like Plato of "Magi," is meant to mould women. For Plath, these ideals are strangely material, and malleable.

The "white" woman that so afflicts the "yellow" woman is herself a spirit extremely constrained in aspect, defined by her purity, selflessness, submissiveness, stupidity, and lack of "personality". In other words, while this particular ideal smothers the subject with her presence, she herself is the
very embodiment of absence, remove, silence ("she didn't answer"), an absence creating absence and retraction: "She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp— / I had even forgotten how to walk or sit". The presence of this "white" female figure is designed to contain (or erase) the "yellow"ness within a cast of silence, submissiveness, and so forth. If the speaker cannot transcend the power of the "white", at least she can be seen as a form of cultural rhetoric.

Clearly, the "white" self fits the description of the traditionally "ideal woman" as defined by Simone de Beauvoir: "The ideal woman is perfectly stupid and perfectly submissive; she is always ready to accept the male and never makes any demands upon him" (203). As the constructed female fantasy, Woman, the cast is a script, or an inscription, written on the body, on the reflexes of the unconscious, like make-up, the wedding dress, the corset, or any idealized female body images, and (here as the very sign of the mother and the ideal woman) the figure of the "nurse" with her homogenized and economical gestures, her pacifying smile, her uniform, her submissiveness which no doubt accounts for her role in male sexual fantasies. The problem, from de Beauvoir and Plath's viewpoint, is that women are not beings in dialogue with their culture, but fashioned bodies cast into narrow roles. Luce Irigaray recapitulates the same problematic:
Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's "activity"; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself . . . . (186-187)

Hence, far from being caught in an imaginary quagmire, Plath's poetry, like Irigaray's philosophy, tries to lift the weight of the symbolic machinery precisely by seeing the statues as machinery and dissolving their effects as overwhelming presences (to be identified with). Plath like Adam names her world, but does not point to objects so much as the systems that underwrite objects. Plath's own archaeology of the body manages to dig up and exteriorize her culture's super-ego, its idealized, commodified "feminine sexuality". In part, Plath dereifies woman as a commodity. She decathects her aura, her glitter. She also shows how that which is naturalized in the unified, interiorized voice (like our desire for acceptance and to be a 'lady') does not simply belong to the psyche, but comes first from the outside, inscribed by an external body like a rigid cast, coffin, or mummy's mask.
To insist upon the "yellow", then, is to resist commodification—the sleek exchangeable object: this year's (new/young) model. Yellow implies old, out of fashion, obsolete, unmarketable, shameful, unclean (a dirtied white, a tarnished gold?)—that which cannot be easily incorporated into market values; "yellow" signifies "worn out" (like yellowed teeth), marked, lined, aged. The yellow of the "yellow" self equals the unbearable details of her history—unbearable to her because unbearable to the cultural ideal, her other self. The more "yellow" ages, the more soiled, faded and yellow she becomes, the less she fits the ideal mould, and this increases her psychic discomfort. She yells low, finding it difficult to express herself outside of the ideal, lady-like world, her voice restricted by the white plaster cast. Plath makes the "yellow" visible, not shunted aside off the stage of the run-way, the cinema, the television, advertising.

Plath breaks open containers, idols, selves, clichés in a number of ways. One important point of detachment from petrification in the image of the other is how the body cannot sustain its attachment to its image (like a signified sliding under a signifier). We have already seen how the image itself falls apart. But the "yellow", through aging and physical difference, is only stressfully tied to the "white." The white, good, hard, statuesque stereotype contrasts to the
yellow, desiring, soft, rotting, aging, temporal, dependent, cowardly, enslaved, speaking self. "White" and "yellow" are not the same; there can be no real identity. One important aspect of this difference is "yellow's" experience of pain. The "itching" discomfort brings the "yellow" self into conflict with the "white" self. Their desires diverge, "white" demanding self-denial and enclosure, "yellow" desiring mobility, expression of (psychological and physical) distress, expression of her body's/mind's own configurations. For Plath, between the system of idols and the system of the "yellow" there is an inherent stress, and hence a promising instability.

But the ideal of the idol is to fix the play brought about by such stress. Instead of a play of difference, the "white" wants only a redoubling of the same. This can be seen in the figure of the cast. On the one hand, the cast represents an incarnation of "whiteness", the mother, the nurse:

... 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.
In line with the desire for incarnation, perhaps, it is the nurse's desire to imagine that the mask wears the body ("a mummy-case / Wears the face of a pharaoh"). Ideally, the self would be an outer expression of the mould, but Plath points out the exteriority, and therefore otherness and instability, of any model. She emphasizes both this otherness and materiality of the cast. For here, it denaturalizes and despiritualizes the fantasy of "whiteness" as pure and transcendent, since it is a mould, not natural, but formed and moulded by people and empty without them. Though hard material, a cast begins as malleable. It is an inorganic, petrified reproduction of a body, like a mummy-case, that functions to house or confine the original body, while it conveys the feelings of constraint and discomfort. The pharaoh's "mummy-case" is also a sign or an idol. And once again, Plath points away from its transcendental meaning. She underscores its construction ("painted"), materiality ("mud and water"), and by implication, its return to the earth. And of course, taking the cast--idol, white, meaning--as an archaeological artifact both further distances this symbol from subjective identification and attends to it as mortal, material, a thing to be examined. This archaeology simultaneously applied to more immediate idols, such as the ideals of womanhood, gives her some breathing space from their effects.
In a sense, Plath unfixes these idols, sets them into motion by reemphasizing their historicity, their decay, and their inevitable conflict with the "yellow." She also breaks their fixity through her play of language and imagery. On a minor level, at least for this poem, Plath unpins the close relation between signifier and signified through punning. The cast evokes the image of embalmed corpses or mummies. This, in turn, linguistically elicits the living mummy, her own mummy perhaps, but most importantly, "mother" as a social myth, mother as typecast.

More importantly, Plath does not invent a conventional narrative, easily digestible by the reader. Except for a few brief moments, each line is more or less complete in itself; or, strangely, single lines often contain two independent, uncoordinated clauses. Hence, the poem reads as if it were a long series of short declarations. Instead of demonstrating the ego's facility--in control of all its objects, through a complex syntax of subordinate clauses, or terms of cause and effect--the speaker (and therefore the reader) stops and starts, again and again. This effect is most intense and jarring when Plath places two uncoordinated independent clauses within a single line, which she does, for example, in both the following lines from the first stanza: "She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints. / At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality--". The way these independent clauses are joined by a comma, instead of divided
by a period, mirrors perhaps the lack of separation between the "yellow" and the "white," the patient and the cast. The parataxis, therefore, mirrors the breakdown of completion or logical containment. The reader is likely to overrun the comma. The parataxis gives way to syntaxis, temporarily, and appropriately, when the speaker is most in thrall to the nurse's wholeness in the fifth stanza. But generally the lines are choppy, disjointed, as if the speaker were out of control--and of course she is! So if "In Plaster" does not draw attention to language through traditional poetic practices (see above), it does draw attention to the production of the sentence through this simple, repetitious style.

People and objects in Plath's work often fail to sit still. We will see an extreme example of this in "A Birthday Present." In "In Plaster", as we saw, "the white person", or more generally the pronoun "she", never settles on a single signified. The meaning of the term "she" only becomes apparent through collecting up the network of displaced terms. In fact, with Plath, one must also look to other poems (as we looked at "Magi") and even outside her text (how "white" is used, for example, in marriage ceremonies, christenings, hospitals) to get the fullest sense of her dreamlike texts. Complementing the slipperiness of the pronoun "she", her spatial location also shifts. At first "she" and "I" appear fused ("two of me now"), then alongside each other, separately
("in bed with me like a dead body"), then like a nurse in the room, but not in bed with her, then surrounding her as cast, mummy, and coffin.

The poem dramatizes the multiplicity of others with which the "yellow" self is in dialogue. The speaker is not speaking to or listening to a single voice, but to related voices and images. These voices and images are constantly shifting shape as if Plath were demonstrating how the linguistic play of differences toys with the fixity of idols. But it is also true that these images and voices share a family resemblance, commenting on each other, emerging as a complex of ideas (i.e., saint leads to immortal which leads to Pharaoh and coffin). At any rate, Plath shifts the ground; she does not interrogate an individual, or a single idol, but a discourse wherein such idols circulate. Moreover, the speaker herself is not a unified individual or a transcendental ego. She is connected to social forms (institutions, stereotypes, languages) thought to be external, but actually having taken up residence in her being. She is a play of signifiers, both "yellow" (marginalized desires) and "white" (cultural idealizations) each of which has its own network of supporting signifiers. The self belongs to language and image.

The activity of separating the individual from the world, directly or indirectly, is no doubt necessary to re-invest the marginalized woman's self with value. But such a move shifts
attention from one of Plath's most powerful practices: tracing the production of a very untranscendental self and denaturalizing and desacralizing the presence of powerful images and scripts. Many of Plath's feminist readers see in poems like "In Plaster", "Tulips", "Magi", "Face Lift" an attempt to overthrow the ruling Christian patriarchy (Yorke 72), by revealing that the ideal images of goodness (or "whiteness") are really false or bad, and that there is an authentic self waiting to break free. Even Liz Yorke, who is the least guilty of this either/or dichotomy, speaks of the "inner voice" (68, 71). Regarding the final lines of "In Plaster", she hints at a detached inner authenticity: "The poet allows the power to speak to remain with the strong self of the woman: it is this self that will sustain. The superior but stupid self will have to go" (my emphasis 72). In this focus on the unity of a "strong" self, Yorke misses Plath's investigation of and insistence upon the production of selves, their inherent disunity, their disturbing enmeshment in a cultural field. Hence, she sees Plath as "self-consciously valorising the female against logocentric conceptions of what constitutes the Good and the True" (68-69 discussing "Magi").

But while Yorke, to a degree, admires Plath's detailing of a specific reified world, one which represses dialogue, other critics tend to translate this worldly specificity into myth, nature, or biographical psychodrama. Judith Kroll ignores Plath's sense of social texture altogether. In "In
Plaster", she focuses instead on the desire of the "soul" and "rebirth" (137); in "Tulips", she speaks of the "true self" and the "Moon-muse" (126). In other words, she translates the social into the mythic, without carrying the mythic back to challenge the 'real world', as Plath does. This "true" self contains the voice, the intelligence, the personality imprisoned within the facade that is Woman. However, what can authenticity buy in the market place (of values, signs, money)? The mythic self transcends the risks of the political self. The "true" self is, ironically, like those rigid images of feminine eternity--the saint, the mother, Mary, "the nurse"--, idols which, pretending to be essences, demand identification while repressing their arbitrariness, historicity, placement within a highly motivated semiotic system. Instead, such poems as "In Plaster" show that the "authentic" voice voices itself in relation to that other self, and only hears itself echoing off the larger other. Similarly, in "Morning Song" the "bald cry" of the child is immediately enveloped by the collective voicings: "Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival". By "magnify", does Plath not suggest the inevitable freezing of the child ("New statue") into an identity, preformed by the others? And does she not also, especially in light of her work taken as a whole, point out the need to resist the absoluteness of this petrification, in part by recognizing its arbitrariness? Plath shatters the unity of the self and the unity of idols, as well as the
transparency of language. For her, the self and the idol are effects of image and language. Hence, this arena (of image and language instead of ego versus ego, or ego versus culture, or ego versus nature) is where she attempts to undo the status quo.

One of the main focuses of this chapter has been to show how Plath struggles and plays with the problems of intense, narrow identifications (nurse to patient, mother to child). If the identification is too immanent one cannot see beyond the ideal image to the overall system, the forces that produce meanings. Plath plays with the idols, showing, in an almost Derridian fashion, their dependence on repressed terms: within "In Plaster", images that appear to be immortal turn out to be mortal; ideal presences turn out to be "absent-minded"; the statue's autonomy shows itself to be dependent on the "yellow"; saintly selflessness is shown to be selfishly demanding of the other's life; and spirit turns out to be an effect of material, mask, signifier. Through her sheer proliferation, parody, interrogation and reversal of binary oppositions, Plath tries to show that the transcendental meaning or the immanent image is not an autonomous essence, but rather an effect of semiotic systems—much like the self.

Plath tries to get outside of the individual and the transcendental ego by bringing the self into the public world, and by reducing nurse, mother, cast, etc. to the status of signs which helps to free them up. Rather than escaping into
interiors which she finds imprisoning, she looks to surfaces—to write over the "white" surface, or to find the writing on it. The "whiteness" becomes an apt metaphor for paper, with Plath trying to reinscribe the difference of the "yellow", by writing the "yellow" onto the "white" surface. Plath fights things out on the open battle ground of signs and significant objects. She turns from her earlier poetry, with its magical and natural unities to a material world, manufactured by motivated forces; the self itself is produced, packaged, and stylized: "things are glittering. / Things, things--", she writes in "Berck-Plage" (30 June 1962). Consider that beneath the gauze of the "dewlapped" lady of "Face Lift" the truth, so to speak, has been erased. The inner, in that case, is a lie; and the gauze itself, the visible, tactile mark, is the temporary meaningful sign of production, for what will be permanently absent. Plath reveals the making of the commodity and, therefore, lets it speak, as it were. The same goes for "In Plaster" where she traces the cultural moulding, casting or production of an idealized woman. Commodities do not speak. They are appearances, sights "mum as a nurse" ("Barren Woman"). What Plath attempts is to let the commodity speak its contorted being.

Finally, I have several times used Mikhail Bakhtin's terms monologic and dialogic in order to flesh out what Plath finds lacking in her dystopic world. In his "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1986) Bakhtin, while insisting upon the self's
enmeshment in the world, tries like Plath to give it some breathing room, some perspective. One must achieve a certain 'space', a sense of one's position in relation to the other, in order to carry out a critical dialogue with others:

When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance (I parry objections that I foresee, I make all kinds of provisos, and so forth). (my emphasis 95)

As the following chapter will detail, such dialogic formulations of re-address are exactly what are destroyed or barred by Plath's vision of the world, defined most forcefully by what might be called the 'hospital style'. The latter only allows for anticipation of and acquiescence in its demands;  

18 The regimental nature of this monologue is expressed most directly in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.". There, the "white" discourse congeals in the figure of the white coated doctor, who stands over the nurse, over the patient, over everything, commanding obedience:

I walk among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi. The red night lights are flat moons. They are dull with blood.

I am the sun, in my white coat, Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers.

The sleepers bear or rather are signs ("sarcophagi") that they themselves cannot read. The only interpreter/reader and (prescriptive) writer in this discursive world is the godlike
it produces a docile body as opposed to Bakhtin's lively "I": "(I agree, I object, I execute, I take under advisement, and so forth)" (95). Many of Plath's poems, and in particular those written around the time of "In Plaster", are about the very possibility of dialogue, what it means, where it takes place, its necessity for the life of the self, its repression especially, but not only, for woman. The problem she addresses, then, is, how does an appearance speak? By pointing to production (of the world and of her self) and by foregrounding the work of signs (their tensions, currencies), she opens up a dialogue with the larger, political Other as opposed to the family unit, or the deworlded world of myth. The next chapter explores Plath's resistance, her specific methods of gaining perspective and distinction from a monologic 'hospital style' culture.

doctor ("the sun"). The patients' bodies are texts that have been translated into the terms of the "white" discourse. (We will see elsewhere, in particular in "Tulips", how alternative styles are annihilated). Notice also how Plath, typical of her work of 1960-61, emphasizes the manufactured nature of her world ("The red night lights are flat moons"). The "white" discourse, or the "hospital style" is, for her, a world, and that world is a thing made by human beings, and therefore transformable, at least in theory.
In keeping with her concern with larger social operations (pun intended), Plath often takes her speakers or characters out of the family spaces and onto more collective or public stages, most prominently the hospital. Her disturbing hospital metaphor of the world dramatizes a non-dialogic, hierarchical system run along gender lines: the figure of "the nurse" exists under the doctor, while the "yellow" person or patient (who is sick and needing to be fixed, healed, drugged, or operated upon) lives under the nurse's overly formalized care. The hospital presents ideal figures ("white" idols) as workers in a laboratory for producing ideal subjects. Again, splitting open the category of the individual, Plath's emphasis is on the very fact that human subjects are produced by particular cultures. Within this world of the hospital, the relationship of the patient to the nurse is like the child to its mother, with the child struggling to figure out what the mother wants. The personae anticipate the addressee's demands and silent imperatives, all of which show how the patient is caught up in the Other's desire (wanting what the nurse/mother/Other wants). In other words, the hospital whites out all the traces of "yellow" that differ from its universalizing order.
In "Tulips", for example, the "white" from "In Plaster" appears again. But here the speaker, lying in her hospital bed, has surrendered to its colonising powers:

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here. Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in. I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly. As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions. I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses. And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

The cool white room contrasts to the heated "explosions" (passions?) the speaker evokes. The demonstrative pronouns show her as if struggling to remain conscious of details ("these white walls, this bed, these hands" [my emphasis]) at the moment they are slipping away. She loses her style ("day-clothes") and personal story ("my history"). In the hospital, she is remade, undressed, her memory erased. The "too excitable" tulips suggest that they are more alive than she. Later, resisting, the speaker thinks of a photo of her husband and child contained in her black "overnight case": "Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks." She resists having this writing inscribed on her body removed or swabbed:
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations. Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley I watch my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head. I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

In a way, this moment resembles the mother attending to her child in "Magi." For here, too, she lovingly attends to the small, concrete elements of her personal life which oppose the concrete theoretical world of the hospital. By contrast, the hospital world exchanges personal ritual (symbolized by the "teaset") for mechanical ritual, intimate care for purely formalized care, and again, dialogue for a monologue of directives. Hence, she presents the disturbing image of the head as an unclosable eye: the nurses "have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. / Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in." This inability to shut her eyes, and make a temporary differentiation between herself and the world, suggests the subject's beholdenness to the address of the Other. The act of shutting the eyes would symbolize a limit, some privacy, a pause from which to turn over/think the demands of the 'hospital style'. Plath's work is haunted by the possibility of fusion, of a complete lack of differentiation. We saw it in "In Plaster," but the full effect of the invasion of the 'outside' is best captured in
"Insomniac" (May 1961):

He lives without privacy in a lidless room,
The bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide-open
On the incessant heat-lightning flicker of situations.

This self, like the drugged selves of which Plath writes, marks the collapse of self—a perhaps perfect identification—into the overwhelming flow of information flooding the space (for reflection, planning, speaking, staking out a territory) between addressee and addressee. In "Insomniac", the homogenization extends beyond the hospital room (although signs of the hospital world remain) out into the world:

Already he can feel daylight, his white disease,
Creeping up with her hatful of trivial repetitions.
The city is a map of cheerful twitters now,
And everywhere people, eyes mica-silver and blank,
Are riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed.

(my emphasis)

The ever-open eye does not digest but only swallows whole.
Plath accurately characterises this positioning of the eye: "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in" ("Tulips"), and such an eye owns no inner space, such space being merely

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colonized by "white" discourse. It is as if, for Plath, such selves had been reduced to mindless bodies.

The nurses of "Tulips" have no more personality than the nurse from "In Plaster". Plath has them echoing the patient's passivity (after all, they are her models), and so they are both homogenizing and homogenous:

The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble, They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps, Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,

So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

Like Robert Lowell in Life Studies, Plath deals with a degraded world where people are reduced to animals, somnolent bodies, or machines. In "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", to give a typical example, Lowell writes of the "subnormal boot-/black heart," "Cat-houses talk[ing] cold turkey to my guards", and "lieutenants squawk[ing] like chickens". Or somewhat more brutally, in "Home after Three Months Away", he writes:

Gone now the baby's nurse, a lioness who ruled the roost and made the Mother cry.
Charles Altieri, describing Lowell as not just a great confessional poet, but the "age's greatest poet" (53), finds him in a chaotic world where men are "deprived of transcendence and condemned to an essentially biological frame of reference" (64). Altieri goes on to write that for Lowell

Reinforcing this subhuman state are repeated images of failed authority figures—pope, president, father, and ancestors—who should mediate the child from natural existence into a meaningful social order and provide him with viable models of human conduct. (64)

For Lowell, the idols have failed, ritual has failed, and the self is left in a void. Much of this is true for Plath too. However, for her, the idols have not receded or disappeared. They have become all too present. The social order has not turned into "flux" (Altieri 64), but has rather become too powerful, systematically controlling, and transcendent, at the expense of the self. For Lowell, the self, intact but shaken, struggles towards meaning. Plath also seeks out meaning, but must first elude the force of the "white" rationalized world and its machinery of stereotypes. And as I mentioned previously Plath does not start from the unified self, perhaps in part to show that the language of the individual was not as available for women in her time. Her speakers rarely appear,
if they appear at all, without foregrounding 'lack'. Plath is more likely to value the inexplicable reference, the surreal object (elements that resist the power of consciousness), intimate spaces, a photograph, a book, the writing on the body or the cast, points of contrast to her (paranoid) vision of the world as hospital.

The images of the hospital focus her view of an order which erases difference. Within it, the old idols (Lowell's longed for popes, presidents, fathers) still exist, running things, as Plath shows in her extremely alienating poem, "Face Lift":

When I was nine, a lime-green anesthetist
Fed me banana gas through a frog-mask. The nauseous vault
Boomed with bad dreams and Jovian voices of surgeons.

(my emphasis)

When the speaker is older the hospital has been transformed. It is no longer so brutal ("They've changed all that"), and has become smoother, cooler. Now the body itself can be silenced:

Nude as Cleopatra in my well-boiled hospital shift, Fizzy with sedatives and unusually humorous, I roll into an anteroom where a kind man
Fists my fingers for me. He makes me feel something precious
Is leaking from the finger-vents. At the count of two
Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard...
I don't know a thing.

As in "Tulips", Plath draws attention to the patient's undressing, here with some sexual connotations. The speaker presents herself as a queen, as if she were being attended to by her minions ("Fists my fingers for me"). But Plath brilliantly and brutally undercuts the speaker's feeling of uniqueness when the line breaks from "makes me feel something precious" to "Is leaking from the finger-vents." The language changes from delusions of royalty to the clinical. Not only is she not "precious", but she is losing herself ("leaking"). Plath presents the new hospital as seductive, sexy, a party (the word "Fizzy" seems to connote champagne). But the end result is exactly the same as in "Tulips": her memory is erased ("like chalk on a blackboard...").

In my discussion of "In Plaster" I was at pains to emphasize that what was at stake was not two selves in combat, but rather two fields of signifiers, the "yellow" and the "white". This is precisely how Plath talks about the struggle here (the same struggle really). When the patient was a child, at least she had the language of dreams, even if they were "bad dreams". Now she has only "Darkness". Furthermore,
the speaker says of the face lift that "it peels away easy as paper." The association with this paper as a text is reinforced when she describes the old face:

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady
I watch settle, line by line, in my mirror--
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg. (my emphasis)

The woman's wrinkles represent a deviant text. The old "paper" had perhaps yellowed. The erasure of the text of her memory ("chalk on a blackboard") is equivalent to the erasure of the 'text' of her body, both are symbols of history (as we saw in "Tulips"), experience, age, which are for women signs of devaluation. If the woman would grow old, she might, if possible, present herself as a visible, alternative text, expanding the depth of the culture's language. But in place of that tapestry, she is infantilized: "I grow backward"; "I wake swaddled in gauze, / Pink and smooth as a baby." This woman is all anticipation of the addressor, without anything to say. Moreover, Plath captures, as only she can, the intense level of self-loathing in the speaker's heartbreaking description of herself as "Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg." She exists to present herself as a commodified appearance. In "Face Lift", Plath captures the entanglement of science, hospitals, and sex. She shows that the hospital is a metaphor for culture. The desires--in what lab were they
produced?—that brought the woman to purchase her face-lift are not created by the hospital; both are part of a larger cultural complex. What Plath seems to want to inscribe on the "white" surfaces of her world is the play of deviant languages and desires.

Plath opens up a second voice which might comment on the "white" monologic world. Against the flat backdrop of the hospital world, she brings shape, shape of the body ballooning out of its flatness. For Plath, such a shape is exactly what the 'hospital style' would arrest. This shape is extension, dimension, a threatening protrusion countering and encountering the hospital environment. One thinks of "Three Women: A Poem For Three Voices", which reiterates the flat hospital world and challenges it. Like "In Plaster" and "Face Lift", "Three Women" presents the (female) body as a potentially dangerous sign. Moreover, as the title announces, the poem suggests a dialogic activity. The poem's long, slowly paced lines (at least 10 syllables each), much like the even longer lines of "In Plaster", conceptualize the speaking voice in process. Instead of the condensed, highly charged poetry of, say, "Lady Lazarus", "Three Women" presents a slow, sometimes prosaic 'working out' of the women's and poet's
thoughts and feelings, as the opening words of the First Voice suggest:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and stars
Regarding me with attention.
The moon's concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
Is she sorry for what will happen? I do not think so.
She is simply astonished at fertility.

These soothing, meditative lines give the impression that the speaker is taking her time (unlike the exclamatory mood of the speaker of "In Plaster"). The first of the two sentences within the first line pauses at a full stop. The second sentence, which ends at the third line, develops a quiet rhythm and then similarly ends demanding some pause. Plath seems to be opposing a mythic-natural time or pace to the fragmentation of clock time. Time does not belong to the

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19 In addition, it is important to remember that Plath wrote "Three Women" as a script for reading aloud, a radio play, unlike the compact poetry of "Lady Lazarus". Subsequently, the texture of "Three Women" will be looser, more allied to the wavering rhythms of conversation.

20 Of course the visual split of the line in mid-sentence also conversely reminds us that this is after all poetry. It can be argued, then, that structurally the poetic (mythic) intrudes upon and breaks up, even shatters her smooth, prosaic (worldly) voice, and, by extension, thoughts.
clock, or the demands of the hospital regime: it is "my time". The speaker transforms the hospital language in other ways too. She changes, for example, "patient" from meaning hospital subject to meaning "patient" as thoughtful, waiting, in another temporal mode. Plath also directly comments on "Tulips". Whereas the nurses in "Tulips" "pass and pass" as white noise, here the moon is the nurse which "passes and repasses": except that in "Three Women" the moon/nurse regards her with a "concern" that is "more personal". The first note of this long poem lets the roundness of the mythic-natural discourse (moon, earth, sun, cycles, pregnancy) comment on the flat rational discourse (closed to the value of alternative writings, like myth and poetry).

Plath mixes the mythological with the worldly (see also footnote #19), only now it is not the worldly intruding into the mythic, destroying the fairy tale realm (see my earlier chapter), but the mythic (poetic) invading the smooth operation of the hospital—i.e., that site of the modern world's myths of salvation (potions to cure death), regeneration (plastic surgery), heroes and Gods (doctors—white knights).

The Second Voice also attempts to recover marginalized languages. Consider, for example, the Second Voice's recounting of events and feelings near the start of the poem:
When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it,
The flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions, Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,

The first three lines are prosaic—reenacting perhaps what Altieri, after Lowell, calls the prose world. Each line ends at a full stop, or at least at a syntactical pause, which emphasizes the (prose) sentence. Has the persona (and reader) been captivated by—sentenced to—the boring world around her?21 At any rate, two styles of discourse or two languages are charted—although differently than by the first voice. Here, Plath opposes men and women, white and red, paved and fluid, flat and round. The second term in each opposition somehow eludes, resists, or cannot be contained by the prose world, the "white" world, the hospital world. For Plath, these differences threaten the later vision of the world.

21 It should be noted that the dullness that results from the poem's casual diction, predictable lineation, and slow pace may be consistent with what the poem says, but it also causes its difficulty as a poem. Except for imitating the idea of "flatness", the poem's form does little to add to its meaning, and in fact may distract from understanding.
The Third Voice does not (just) speak the mythic-natural language of the First Voice, or the sceptical, 'feminist' language of the Second Voice. The Third Voice speaks the language of the unconscious, of how the emotions can reorganize the shape of the world for consciousness. The Third Voice recounts the shock of realising that she is pregnant, and how she "wasn't ready." I quote the first two stanzas in full to convey the full, surreal effect:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure. The willows were chilling, The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine-- It had a consequential look, like everything else, And all I could see was dangers: doves and words, Stars and showers of gold--conceptions, conceptions! I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look, Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river. There is a snake in swans. He glided by; his eye had a black meaning. I saw the world in it--small, mean and black, Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act. A hot blue day had budded into something.
Ironically, perhaps as a parody of the transcendental ego, the piece begins with an assertion of certainty—the realization that she is pregnant. This information alters her perceptions: objects, people, and animals appear threatening, "chilling," "consequential," "danger[ous]", as if her unconscious had seized the outer environment. In fact, an obviously Freudian unconscious ruptures into the surface world ("There is a snake in swans"), reflecting her fears of pregnancy, with the statement.

Befitting the language of the unconscious, words and phrases, here, are particularly slippery. "[C]hilling" suggests both that the trees are, speaking objectively, cold and that they are emotionally distant, terrifying, judging. "[C]onceptions," especially in the context of Plath's work as a whole, implies both pregnancy and idea, undercutting the power of the latter with the overwhelming presence of the former. And finally, her division from herself is suggested with the strange statement that "The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine--". The line does not appear to mean that she is not literally hers, but that she does not recognize herself. The image in the pool belongs to the charged otherworldly, post-conception world that she is scarcely managing to repress. For Plath, the self is not unified, and not in control of its environment. Signs (in this case tied to the body) can potentially invade one's world vision, potentially altering everything. No discourse is
safe. With the Third Voice, body, pregnancy, the unconscious, and the play of signification mark both difference (the presence of marginalized styles of perception) and threats to the self certainty of the rational world and its rational subject.

Despite their different discourses, and that they do not communicate with each other, the Voices are united by shared experience and the form of the poem. This is a step beyond the 'lyrical' concerns of the alienated ego in poems like "Two Sisters of Persephone" and "Soliloquy of the Solipsist"; for here, the ego is not alienated, at least not from the reader's or Plath's perspective, since we can see how these three women belong to/with each other, how they are fused poetically and by their similar situations and bodily forms. The three pregnant voices address, or rather fill out, the grey-on-gray (or rather white-on-white) 'hospital style' that tries to contain their bodies, that cannot wait until these bodies become 'normal' or flat again. The whiteness of the hospital (uniforms, walls, bedding) creates an effective image for the collapse of perspective into flatness and rational coolness.

The Three Voices articulate three different discourses, each of which comments upon the dominant discourse, each of which opens up a unique way of seeing. For Plath, the naturalness of pregnancy is not (just) a sign of female authenticity, a retreat into the purity of biology, but rather (or perhaps in addition) it is a sign of abnormality or
"deformity" ("Three Women"), an un-forming, and therefore a point of tension, a leak that the dominant discourse needs to contain. As a sign it brings in a contrasting language which insinuates itself into the cool and calm of the doctors and nurses. Plath, then, announces the intrusion of an "alien" ("Three Women") empire and its strange tongue. By this I allude to Bakhtin who in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* celebrates the disruption of monologue via the intermingling of alien languages/world views. Certainly in "Three Women", Plath fleshes out the empire of the body and uses it as a way to address the monologic world around her. The existence of her 'rounded' language opens a dialogue with the "flat", cool, unaffected language; moreover, Plath takes as her object the very need for such perspective. Clearly "flatness" represents more than the flatter non-pregnant body; it represents monologue, an insistence upon a singleness of style or point of view: "The flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions, / Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed, / Endlessly proceed". The monotony of "flat, flat, flatness", enacting the mechanical and orderly world of the hospital, conceals the violence of the "guillotines". But from this, the round stomachs of the pregnant women pop up out of the bulldozed, paved road of reason. Plath seems to envision an invasion of the "flat" hospital space, by the "round", even before the poem begins: "Setting: A Maternity Ward and round about" (my emphasis). Whether directly
alluding to it or not, Plath's opposition of the image of the "round" women to the "flat" ward, containing the "flat" ideas of "the men", echoes E. M. Forster's division of "characters into flat and round" (46) in his Aspects of the Novel (1927). Forster defines flat characters as "types" (46) "caricatures" (47), "easily recognized" (47). He writes that they lack "development" (47) and are "unalterable" (48). In this respect, they provide "a comforting quality" (48); "they are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (47) which "is capable of surprising" (54) and unsettling the reader and other characters. Certainly, on one level, Plath makes complex the flat character of the "white", changing its homogenous aspect forever, by introducing the diffuse and repressed language of the body (and desire).

Plath's flat/round dichotomy foregrounds the materiality of female ideals. In "Face Lift", the bandages point to the (re)construction of beauty, or the bulldozing-flattening of a non-idealistic distinctiveness. The bandages and the operation pave over nature's artistry, as well as those lines which bear witness to cultural experience. Plath underscores the way the bandages conceal not just the designer face (designed for the needs of the other), but the way the designer face conceals the irregular line, the deviant script. The signs that Plath weaves together to make up her language
are taken from the realm of 'irregularity'--mythic, surreal, or feminist languages; also the growth of wrinkles, the pained, unstable pregnant body, shrieks, wounds, signs of pain, the scar, the smear, the leakage and seepage. It is just such nodal points, according to Plath, that the hospital world wants to control, for fluid and ephemeral as the points might seem, they harden into meaningful representations in Plath's works. Such elements are associated with an identifiable, uncontrollable, devouring life force, which is the death of rational identity; the "Third Voice" says: "I am a mountain now, among mountainy women. / The doctors move among us as if our bigness / Frightened the mind." Later, the Second Voice also suggests a tremendous power of earth/nature/woman/difference which needs to be somehow contained:  

. . . . The dark earth drinks them.

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us, Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red. I know her. I know her intimately--

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22 This mythology explains the uses of Plath's Moon figure: its many guises and its harshness represent no comfort for any self, female or male. What she does represent is the element that cannot be assimilated to any single world view. She/Moon cannot be controlled. She is always external, barely in view, her gravity/pull is, in fact, invisible to the naked eye.
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.

The hospital world is a metaphor for the cool of reason, ideal because it is a place where normality, silence, science, fight off death—disease, aging, accidents. The hospital stands as a metaphor for the colonising powers of mind over body. It is where science operates on the uncontrollable and irrational, the devouring Vampire/Mother that Plath speaks of. In order to control its fear of death, the "white" mentality ends up identifying with death, imposing its mono-logic over everything to the point of indistinction, the dissolution of mind and body into a pure "white" oblivion.

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For Plath, there is a war happening. The body, as flesh and sign, is the ground of a new language. Significantly, the body stands for openings and openness; it also decenters the ego, despite the women's heightened, defamiliarized awareness. Those ensnared in the "white" world, however, appear to be defensively retracting into themselves, just as, under the auspices of the 'hospital style', the un-flat, pregnant women are encouraged to feel "blunt and flat enough to feel no lack". The Third Voice claims that "They are to blame for what I am, and they know it. / They hug their flatness like a kind of health", while the First Voice sees herself as "the center of an atrocity", but also "very patient" as if anticipating the doctors' or nurses' desire: "I am a great event / I do not have to think, or even rehearse." On one level, this lack of rehearsal (i.e. culture) suggests an essentialist stance, but I prefer to emphasize that the women's bodies are not signs of conscious intention, but rather signs of a complex happening, an articulation only partly within their control, and certainly beyond the kind of control demanded by the logos. The body as event suspends intention, waits to see what happens, marks the new, possibly primordial, articulations. The women's heightened consciousness, quite receptively, names or marks
She speaks of the confines of the "white", sterile, "cold", nurse-filled maternity ward, a medicalized world where "The faces have no features. / They are bald and impossible," echoing the setting and feel of "In Plaster," and the conflict between textualized and erased bodies of "Tulips," and "Face Lift". "Three Women" goes even farther than "In Plaster" in detailing the unifying "white" system. The women name the problem: the massive machinery that erases all difference. Above and beyond the symbolism of the hospital, the women name those "other faces. The faces of nations, / Governments, parliaments, societies, / The faceless faces of important men" (my emphasis) who feel threatened by that which does not seem 'natural' or, more accurately, 'normal' according to the dictates of the "white" world: "They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods / That would have the whole world flat because they are." For Plath, the 'hospital style' directs itself precisely against the kind of doubling, tripling ("what if two lives leaked between my thighs?"), seeping, pain, scarring, passion, demands, out of a fear of death. In these poems, she fleshes out a counter

the characteristics of the vibrant new world. After all, the hospital ward is a place of origins, of "first things" (to borrow Mary Jacobus's title of her book); it makes sense that Plath might name things anew. Here we have, then, a doubling or meeting of consciousness and the address of the empire of the body. And the women draw from this a counter discourse, found in the fact of the infants as well as in the abnormality of their positions—the doubling of their beings, their seeping and leaking, and uncool discomfort.
discourse in body shape which rescues the gestures that the "jealous gods" would banish. Plath links up several layers of rationalized culture's desire for oblivion, from the hospital ward to the political ward; she sees a sort of process of disfigurement, the erasure of shape.

For Plath, a colourful spectrum of languages and styles--struggling against the white--emerge from the start of life. This brings us back to Plath's implicit notion of shape as the introduction of perspective, and as a vision of difference which rises out of the body. The hospital may be envisioned as a flat line (the medical sign of death) dividing two worlds. On one side, the child has its own distinct being, which it will "remember" ("Three Women") again (cf., Plato, Wordsworth) in this world. But first the infant appears at the mercy of the hospital, veiled in its white, anonymous, wrappings. The First Voice says:

Look, they are so exhausted, they are all flat out
In their canvas-sided cots, names tied to their wrists,
The little silver trophies they've come so far for.

And in their exhaustion they are, in fact, predisposed to indistinction: she thinks "they are made of water", that "they have no expression", that "They are the real monks and nuns in their identical garments." Here, Plath has created a rather
angelic vision of homogeneity. But she also sees this as temporary. It is a moment of rest before carrying on an already ongoing trip. Despite their "flat" states, "They are beginning to remember their differences." They have a shape above and beyond the one "tied to their wrists," a self prior to 'becoming', and this shape emerges, in part, from their unique bodies: "There are some with thick black hair, there are some bald. / Their skin tints are pink or sallow, brown or red". For Plath, colour is often tied to the self--identity and mood; the different colours are perhaps like different moods or styles which push out against the absorbing "white", the cool of reason, which mutes and effaces individual demand and difference. Consider the Third Voice's child: "I see her in my sleep, my red, terrible girl. . . . She is crying, and she is furious." The child's body and colour (substance and form) are like a work of art, or style, a unique formation: "I think her little head is carved in wood, / A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open." Plath has travelled backwards to what Mary Jacobus calls "First Things" in order to rethink the almost all-absorbing instrumental world. The "alien" and alienating mechanical world is what she explicitly

24 Mary Jacobus defines "First Things" as "the earliest, unformed yet vitally informing phantasies that shape the infant's emergence as a subject; the first 'Thing' is Julia Kristeva's maternal thing, the not-yet object of an emerging, chaotic not-yet subject" (iv). The poet's quest for "First Things" is a quest to "re-find the maternal body and re-member ourselves" (1).
fears, the "white" machinery which (re)forms desire into its own image. But here, she finds that the babies are unique presences, expressing themselves. If Plath feels eviscerated and controlled by the "hooks" (her much used word for 'word') of the logos, she finds in the child's expression of need a primordial language: "Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats. / It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice." Moreover, this demonstrative expression goes beyond need. What the child wants is also "notice", to address and be addressed. It is an ideal, in a way, since the child's body is its own form of messages (colour, shape, sound) sent out into the world, rather than just a docile body, receiving the inscription/scripts written by the "white" fathers.

In opposition to the child's vital rupture from the mother's body, from the code of cool and silence, and the muted colours, the mothers' "voices" are all too silent, contained, self addresses. Despite the strangeness of their situations and the pain that they feel, they fail to tear the social fabric around them. The Second Voice, as she prepares to leave, assumes what seems to be a tired, prescripted identity. Despite her ironic recognition of herself as "beautiful as a statistic", she prepares to reenter the static life of before, thinking "Here is my lipstick. // I draw on the old mouth. / The red mouth I put by with my identity". The likelihood of reabsorption, that will mute the transgressive potential of the child's being, is great, as the
First Voice makes painfully clear in her last meditation. She fears an abnormal presence that might disrupt her unconscious fusion with the given reality:

I do not believe in those terrible children
Who injure my sleep with their white eyes, their
fingerless hands.

........................................................
I shall meditate upon normality.
I shall meditate upon my little son.

..............................................
I have papered his room with big roses,
I have painted little hearts on everything.

I do not will him to be exceptional.
It is the exception that interests the devil.

..............................................
I will him to be common, (my emphasis)

In place of the dangers of uniqueness, or "the exception that interests the devil" (who opposes the patriarchal gods?) the mother sentimentalizes and tames the vital colours or spirit of her infant. She turns the "terrible" "red" of the baby's body, the baby's shriek that injures her "sleep", into the flattened "roses" and "little hearts" (both presumably red) with which she papered his room. In other words, the shape or
dimension of the body, in this case a demanding, screaming, red child, has collapsed into mere pacifying background.

If the body is a potential resource, an origin of difference, a palimpsest from which one might erase or write languages, Plath finds that that urge for 'cool' (re: the hospital discourse) and control demands the veiling of the (female) body. For Plath, the body condenses different ideas: uncontrollable shapes, differences, multiplicity, and desire. The body is a text (lines, scripts, paint, tatoos) linked to desire (tears, love, care, passion). The hospital or rather the "white", by contrast, would recycle all this bodily text and make blank pages. Hence Plath rebels specifically against paving over ("Three Women"), plastering over ("In Plaster"), erasing faces and memories ("Tulips", "Insomnia", "Face Lift", "In Plaster"), treating the eyes as tabula rasa ("Tulips", "Insomnia"), and treating the personality as blank or pure "white" ("In Plaster", "Tulips", "Face Lift"). The pristine, white sheet of paper idealizes clear, clean regular space. It idealizes transparency: the body is shaped or understood so as to be easily 'read' by the doctor for example. As the figure of the pregnant woman suggests, Plath cannot accept this sense of homogenous space, transparency, blankness.

For Plath, the eye does not see transparently. Rather transparency is one mode of perception. In her work, clear surfaces often fail to reflect back the subject's own image,
as when she speaks of "admiring" the ambiguous "it" of "A Birthday Present" (its "glaze, the mirrory variety"), or the surface reflects back one's own image only, as when she writes, speaking of a baby in "For a Fatherless Son": "I love your stupidity, / The blind mirror of it. I look in / And find no face but my own". Perhaps this is why she emphasizes touch as a way to knowledge. In "For a Fatherless Son", the source of her distress, she speculates, will not be seen but felt: "To have you grab my nose, a ladder rung. / One day you may touch what's wrong". For Plath, such intimate spaces are destroyed by the "white" discourse.

In "The Detective", Plath mocks the transcendental egoist and his spaces. "The Detective" begins by evoking a transparent geographical space imagined by the sleuth:

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?

The detective, in the guise of the transcendental ego, knows what questions to ask, what "is important", what to imagine, how to interpret how bodies move through space. He even imagines (is this projection, reflecting back his own image, as it were?) the victim "arranging cups". Everyone must be making space orderly. The questions, here, belong to a
rational discursive field. The detective-perspective fantasizes what might have caused the problem: "Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife? / Which of the poisons is it? / . . . Did it electrify?" There is a sense of security in the language (contra "A Birthday Present"), in the process or procedures of investigation. He asks which of "the poisons", as if it must be one kind or another, and all part of a game of mastering mystery.

The detective's discourse depends on the erasure of her body, clearing the scene of her presence. The female body is hidden, "The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall, // A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising." She is the void which allows them to imagine their visions of order, without the inconvenience of a body, a body which might not be readily assimilated into the detective's paradigm and which might have its own discourse:

...This is a case without a body.
The body does not come into it at all.

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

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The woman had wanted to speak, but the threat of her uncontrollable ("insatiable") passionate reaction against someone (her husband?) instigated the murder (her "punishment"). A space is cleared then (her body, variously shrunken, vaporized, tamped into the wall) both for the discourse of the murderer, and for the bloodless activity of the detective.

The detective solves problems, analyzes without passion. He is the very image of detached, egotistical certainty, Sherlock Holmes, who says, underscoring his disengagement from the body:

We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

The body and nature, with which it is allied as a force, are tamed or dead (the moon "embalmed in phosphorus"). This death serves rational discourse, for those veiled bodies (of nature, female limbs) are apparently the site of alternative desires which might disturb the peace.

On another level, the peaceful, orderly space observed by the detective is not what it seems. In fact, their note-taking is absurd for "No one is dead" after all. And the meaning of the house space has more to do with the psychological chaos resulting from the breakdown of a marriage
than with the apparent orderliness of the house. The house is empty, clean, well lit:

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Conflicting with the detective's reading of it, this is an emotionally charged space, an obtrusive emptiness (the "hoodlum" is still there). The surface spaces offer only illusions: "These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs, / And this is a man, look at his smile, / The death weapon?" The spatial orderliness is a lie, and the more or less straight-forward narrative of the poem, with its emphasis on hypothesis (theory), floats over a missing emotionally volatile order, expressed most violently.

By contrast, instead of merely parodying abstract space, "A Birthday Present" radically, formally explodes it. The persona's questions are open-ended, unchannelled. Space closes in on the persona, and there is no room for her or the reader to breathe; there is no clearing. The persona's body emerges in this poem, but it appears only as an impossibility,
or at least it is impossible as long as it is surrounded and colonized by patriarchal discourse. The intense questioning of the opening lines sets the tone for the entire poem:

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?

It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want. When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking.

Unlike the detective's crime scene or the hospital's clean spaces, this space is nontransparent. Furthermore, disrupting the transparency of signifier and signified, Plath does not let the reader know what the object is, what "it" refers to. Nor is the space dead, empty or clear, but rather it is charged with ambiguous subjective meaning, animated by the speaker's unconscious perhaps. According to one reading, Plath's disfigured persona (the "I" of the poem) may be imagining the distance between herself and cultural ideals (of mother Mary). What follows may then be read as a parody of what Gabriel is thought to ask of Mary:

'Is this the one I am to appear for,
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?

Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh!

The speaker may be projecting, imagining, or hallucinating the thoughts she cites. Or perhaps the birthday present actually speaks to her. The status of the citation within her text is not clear because we do not know what kind of world she inhabits. It does not, for example, seem to instantiate the logic of "The Detective"'s world.

In fact, the speaker's world upsets such orderliness. Instead of her having a subjective presence in control of the objects around her (like a detective, perhaps), the reader's central image of the speaker comes from the judgements of the commodity (or whatever..."it" is: superego, angel, devil, male, gift, death?). Moreover the speaker takes up the position of object when she says "But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me" (my emphasis). Not only do subject and object reverse positions, but none of the objects maintain solidity or visibility; they are only almost present. One's eyes are tantalized with the promise of a sight: "Now there
are these veils, shimmering like curtains, // The diaphanous satins of a January window". But this is only a tease; the windows are finally "White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath." Hence the real subject of the poem seems to be a frustratingly non-referential "it", supported by equally opaque "that"s, "you"s, and "I"s. In other words, these signs of subjects and objects are thoroughly ungrounded—in any ordinary order.

In addition to Plath's assaults on ordinary language, she also disturbs 'normal' male-female relations. In "The Applicant", it is worth noting, the female band-aid plays an "it" to a male subject: "You have a hole, it's a poultice" (my emphasis). While "The Applicant" challenges by way of fleshing out the obscene desires of the patriarchy, "A Birthday Present" presents the speaker with a monstrous power while dressing the male up in veils, placing him in the position usually allotted to women. (She identifies with the hole of desire, that which needs to be controlled, rather than any whole—the promise of that special "it" to fulfil all her desires). Amidst the ambiguity, the linguistic and thematic veilings, the woman, "the one with black eye-pits and a scar" stands out like a fascinating stain on the environment. Unlike the women of "Face Lift" and "The Applicant", this woman does not erase, fix or sew up what appears like gaping wounds, any more than Plath stitches together the openness of "A Birthday Present". In this sense she exists for herself,
not for another. She makes visible signs of her irreducible or unassimilable difference.

The male, as John Berger has pointed out (see Ways of Seeing 64), cannot maintain his sense of detachment and mastery if he occupies the female position, object of her gaze. In "The Applicant", of course, the female is pure object, the complement to the "it" of "A Birthday Present":

It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.

("The Applicant")

This robotic body has been perfectly tailored to the male's needs. In "A Birthday Present", the male position is disfigured:

It must be a tusk there, a ghost-column.
Can you not see I do not mind what it is.

Can you not give it to me?
Do not be ashamed--I do not mind if it is small.

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.
In "The Applicant", Plath writes, addressing the male, "You have an eye, it's an image", with the image referring, naturally, to the female commodity. But in "A Birthday Present" he is the sexual object/commodity. She turns the tables on the masculine position, dressing him up in veils, just as a woman's body is so often veiled. Now at the mercy of the female gaze, the male here appears to experience anxiety, an emasculating vulnerability ("I know why you will not give it to me, / You are terrified"). In striking contrast to the woman with the "black eye-pits", Plath has the male on parade, turns him into an image for another's gaze: "Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam, // The glaze, the mirrory variety of it." Despite—or perhaps reflected in it—the truly absurd imagery, there is no doubt that the coherence of the male position cannot survive the reversal, that "The world will go up with a shriek, and [his] head with it".

For Plath, "transparencies, clear air" ("A Birthday Present") and solidly articulated statues are reenvisioned as mere fantasy, fantasy which pretends to coherence, but which in reality is nothing more than bits and pieces which strive for a clarity-effect. Plath's operations on this fantasy material transform it from the absorbing grey on grey of the hospital into collage. In other words, there is for her no ultimate, neutral backdrop or objective space. As she
suggests in "For a Fatherless Son", space itself is an active force, a message: "You will be aware of an absence, presently, / Growing beside you, like a tree". For her, the body, like her body of poetry, is in reality porous. Complementing the slippery language and the shapeshifting in her poetry, Plath often describes bodies, in particular the female body, as associated with fluids: women are pictured seeping, leaking, bleeding, giving birth--as if these were not only a primal force but a forceful language, a tongue alienated by abstraction.

For Plath, a fluid world rushes, often in a threatening way, near, in, and through her body: i.e., "the particles of the clouds" ("Burning the Letters"), "the sky pours into the hole like plasma" ("Berck-Plage"), "air motes" ("The Other" 2 July 1962), unseen poisons flowing through her "veins" ("A Birthday Present"). Plath symbolizes this openness through which fluids and objects pass to the external world, with her

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25 As Jacqueline Rose states, Plath continually reworks her poetry, rethinking an earlier poem in a new one. According to Rose we cannot even understand the meaning of one poem unless we read it in the context of the poems that surround it: "these late poems can be understood only in dialogue with each other" (146). In fact, one could argue that Plath's porosity is more strewn out than the local relativity discussed by Rose. For key terminology (Plath's master signifiers) only gathers meaning in a broad context spanning not just days, but years (i.e. the moon's "drag", the role of the mirror, the "mote"); even less obscure terms only crystallize in a broad context--the figure of the nurse, flatness, liquids. Plath's difficulty for the reader is that her late work, like her later sense of body, is porous. It needs a context. Hers is not a "well wrought urn", a self contained body.
pervasive images of the trace of the wound (scar) or the open wound itself, as in the disturbing "eye-pits" of "A Birthday Present". The bodily world beyond abstraction, despite its terrible dangers, is what Plath values. As in "Poppies in July" (July 20 1962), the body of "A Birthday Present" is subject to poisoning and dissolution ("the clouds are like cotton. / Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide"). For Plath, the world associated with the body (the frustratingly elusive "it"?) is opaque, amorphous (cloudy, cottony), passionate, vulnerable, risky. In opposition to the porous body and the uncertain world of multiple spaces, the male figure gains clear vision and health by only concealing himself in the surgeon's gown and mask, or a suit of shining armour, or a space suit ("You are silver-suited for the occasion"). Wounds and ambiguous fluidity are what the "white" world wants to control. Hence the space mask imposes its detached spaces over the world. It is because of the fact of the porous body, Plath seems to reason, that the statue, the mannequin, the robotic wife emerge--to seal the wound. They are object-like plugs. They are consistent, serviceable and servicing identities which evoke immortality and stave off that vampire (that vamp's ire).

The hard body of technology, medicine, artillery (see "The Courage of Shutting Up")--all of those mechanical products and austere images that the male self is allowed to
identify with—is collage posing as homogenous surface. In contrast to the suggestion or evocation of a coherent world of statues, logics, petrification, the control of 'the thing' or "it" (nature, woman, desire), "A Birthday Present" ends up making of all this just so much chaotic mater-ial. Weapons, statues, phalluses, technology, the hospital, god's word, all of these appear dislodged from any 'normal' sense of space. It is as if, for Plath, without the specificity of the body, the logos drifts without much sense. Therefore, she is on the side of such a specific body, gazing out at the repressive objects and symbols from behind her veil/window/bell jar. In contrast to "The Detective", the repressed body of "A Birthday Present" applies pressure to the surface world, threatening to

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26 The point I have been suggesting is that for Plath, without the specificity of individual bodies, both male and females are forced to fuse with mechanical masks which swallow up all distinctiveness. The male will be identified and fused to technological instruments, or veiled behind the surgeon's mask or the detective's stern face, or the homages to the phallus, or the wedding suit. Of course the male will be more identified with power, but only at the cost of sacrificing all uniqueness.

27 By "chaotic mater-ial" I am not going so far as to suggest that Plath's is an "écriture feminine" or "gynocentric poetics", that is, women's writing as disrupting the usual linear, logical, closed, "masculine" form with, for example, its informal and "incorrect" uses of language, insertion of syntactic ambiguities, play with words and open-endedness; even though, "A Birthday Present" seems to be moving in that direction in the way it frustrates development of coherent points of view. See Alicia Ostriker's Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (1986), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1988) for discussions on "écriture feminine" and "gynocentric poetics".

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pour through its pores to loosen the earth's paved surfaces and the poem's enpaged coherence.

The body in Plath is porous; or it is like a collage, little islands of clarity that are, claustrophobically, never allowed to cohere, or to colonize the poetic environment. This is why her poetry is so difficult to read: her metaphoric body either dissolves or clots such coherence. Body, here, has already been invaded by an army of colonizing signifiers. As a result, something vital has been lost or repressed. Through her poetry Plath attempts to unearth the (metaphorical and real) primal body that has been repressed by colonies of signifiers. But as Plath shows us in her final poems, this body is also a force that is feared by the cool of reason. It is a monstrosity, the hidden face of humanity or nature, and a terrifying force to be reckoned with.

Most often in her later work, Nature is a sign of the abnormal, the irregular, like the wound or the scar, or the stained bandages of an operation, or the pain of the body, everything that cool scientific culture must 'know', 'explore', 'control'. In this respect it can be taken up by Plath without the usual connotations of essentialism or romanticism. In other words, to gain perspective Plath goes to Nature as she would go to an Other place. In "Elm" (19 Apr. 1962) she writes:
I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there.

Plath looks up from the "bottom" (hell?), a space which reframes the given reality without repairing anything, without recasting the cast, so that it appears as repressive and brutal, bending the body into its peculiar images. She looks from behind the glass ("Three Women"), inside the jar (The Bell Jar), the bottom of the world ("Elm"), behind a veil or mask ("A Birthday Present", "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box"), within a cast ("In Plaster"), or behind bandages ("Face Lift"). And even when her personae are not being so squeezed, Plath manages to create a freakish, abnormal sense of space which disturbs the smooth, monochromatic, and calm surfaces of the 'normal'--the middle-class kitchen, the beach, the park, etc. In "Elm" the persona is, in fact, the event which shatters space:

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.

A wind of such violence

Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

Of course sometimes her struggle to side with Nature is in vain. In "Poppies in July", for example, she again
pictures nature, the "Little poppies", as "little hell flames" (my emphasis). To her, they are not romantically beautiful or peaceful, but are "wrinkly", "seep[ing], "fum[ing]", "bloodied" "mouth[s]" that "exhaust" her to watch them. As such, they echo the imagery from "Three Women", "The Detective", and "Face Lift" which speak of inscribing a network or map of crow's feet and furrows, where thought is tattooed on nature around the eyes and between the eyebrows, over the smooth spaces of the hospital, pavement, or homogenous space. She addresses the poppies:

Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.

I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

However, in this case, the caesura in the second line marks a hard division that persists between herself and Nature here; Nature is out there, untouchable. When she puts her hands among the flames she feels nothing. But she wants to "bleed" and feel the hurt: "If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!" She wants to be in touch, both figuratively and literally, with that threatening energy which includes repressed emotions, feelings of hatred, vengeful thoughts, passions not usually associated with domesticated 'nice girls'. She tries to get at the perspective (colour, shape) of her body, its own
networks of meaning, and interpose that mapping against official networks of meaning. Her own body is, then, in two worlds and at odds with itself.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Plath shows the self already belonging to "white" discourse, that the "white" discourse attempts to sterilize or "flatten" any signs of difference, colour or (as we see in this chapter) shape. Plath challenges the notion of an autonomous, unified self who confronts a disintegrating (other) world. Instead, Plath's self is as fragmented as the world surrounding her, and actually is part of, and a product of, this world of fragments. Given this understanding of self along with her view of the social landscape, Plath struggles to find a new way of addressing power, one which supersedes the old vision of the alienated but unified hero standing over the world.

Despite the efforts of the "white" hospital world, distinction emerges in Plath's poetry, most often in terms of body shape. In Stealing the Language, Alicia Ostriker writes:

One of the ways we recognize a poetess--which is to say a woman poet locked into sentimentality by her inhibitions--is that she steers clear of the anatomical references. As womanly inhibition declines, we grow aware of its sources in dualistic ideology, gender polarization, and the dread of
female sexuality. One of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken some kind of liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves. (92)

Ostriker cites Plath as one of those women writers whose "work is filled with body images" (99). But she adds that Plath is among a "large number of women poets since the 1960s [who] appear to view the body as a source essentially of pain, not pleasure" (98). For Ostriker, in Plath's poetry, "[t]he drama of social and political life plays out, on a nightmarishly large scale, the victimization of the body" (101). She sees nothing positive in Plath's display of body; rather "transcendence is the solution to the problem of the body" which "merely means joining the killers instead of the killed" (103). Ostriker's reading of Plath is bleak; and certainly Plath's display of body (parts) is painful. However, as we have seen in this chapter, Plath shows body as not only reified, but as a powerful force whose very presence works to subvert the dominant, "flat" homogenous discourse.

In all of this, Plath suggests the emergence of a new 'language', a new way of addressing the social scene. Rather than identifying with "white" (seeing it as a person, idol, statue), she disperses it, forces it into the play of language: she sees it as discourse, defamiliarizing the "white" as presence or nature by underscoring artifice,
technique, and device. Moreover Plath counters the given, "white" discourse with her own discursive deformations. In chapter four, we will see Plath in her final poems foregrounding and giving voice to the most 'deformed' of persons, while continuing to situate them directly in the world. What results is a language that fails to adequately unify the self, as is the case in Plath's bee poems and "Lady Lazarus". Even in "Daddy" where we may identify most easily with the speaker, the poem itself is not calm, meditative, or lyrical, but more of a chant. Plath moves away from the idea of a detached self or private consciousness, and replaces it with the formation of an all-inclusive ritualistic, public stage.
In her finest and best known poems, Plath investigates the possibility of female selfhood within a world where "it" is contained by a rigid script and limited to the silence of an overly objectified body. On the one hand, she gives us poems like "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins" where women have been reduced to nothing but functional bodies, devoid of humanness. On the other hand, in poems such as "Lady Lazarus" she conversely examines those elements of the self which resist assimilation into stereotypical roles. More specifically, in such works, Plath reacts against the absence, at least for women, of a public realm wherein one might make visible and unstable the given relations of power.

For many critics, Plath's strategy in these later poems is one of "imitative recasting" (Linda Hutcheon's description of parody). In fact, Hutcheon points out in A Theory of Parody (1985) that Plath's work has been seen as a "feminist reworking (or parody) of modes of male modernism which she inherited" (54). Frederick Buell, for example, shows that among Plath's best poems, like "Lady Lazarus", Plath sarcastically mocks poetic "incarnation" as "self-destructive unity", for the speaker becomes both the "violated known and violating knower" (149). Similarly, Toni Saldivar draws on "Sow" (1957), "I Want, I Want" (1958), and "Mushrooms" (13...
Nov. 1959) to show that Plath mocks "the American tradition [perpetuated by Harold Bloom] of the highly individualistic gnostic imagination that tries to see through the given world in order to see itself in some reassuring self-generated formal identity" (112); as well, Mary Lynn Broe reads "Daddy" as "pure self-parody" in which "the metaphorical murder of the father dwindles into Hollywood spectacle" (172). Of course parody is limited, as Hutcheon warns, in that it often tends to remain conservatively locked within the terms of the discourse it mocks. However, Plath's later poems are not restricted to "pure" parody because she attempts to reinvent her world and her place in it. "Daddy", for example, does not so much "dwindle" into Hollywood spectacle as explode into it. Here, Plath puts her persona and her persona's relationships on display. "Daddy" makes the invisible visible, the private public, cracking open the interiors, the spaces traditionally designated to women. In a way, Plath stages a public trial, turning the commonplace into spectacle, revealing form as deformity, the natural as commodity, domestic life as torture.

It is not surprising, then, that Plath has been so often viewed as transgressing 'good taste'. But it is just this 'bad form', including her spectacles of abuse, that is a major focal point of her later work. In fact, Jacqueline Rose, in an analysis of "Daddy", devotes the entire chapter to the debate over Plath's "inappropriate" use of metaphor. Rose begins:

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For a writer who has so consistently produced outrage in her critics, nothing has produced the outrage generated by Sylvia Plath's allusions to the Holocaust in her poetry, and nothing the outrage occasioned by "Daddy", which is just one of the poems in which those allusions appear. (205)

In defense of Plath's outrageous comparisons, Rose, noting how Plath moves backwards and forwards between the German "Ich" and the English "I", argues that "Daddy" represents, in part, "a crisis of language and identity" (228); after all, she was second-generation German: "What the poem presents us with, therefore, is precisely the problem of trying to claim a relationship to an event in which--the poem makes it quite clear--the speaker did not participate" (228). Rose asks in conclusion: "Who can say that these were not difficulties which [Sylvia Plath] experienced in her very person?" (229)

In her struggle to show that Plath has "earned" the right to represent the Holocaust ("Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews", so believes Leon Wieseltier [20]), Rose feels it necessary to turn her into a persecuted German. Her persecution for being a woman (daughter, wife) as the poem would have it, is simply not enough. As if this were still not enough, James Fenton, although agreeing with Rose, throws out the suggestion in The
New York Review of Books (29 May 1997) that Plath may have believed she actually was Jewish:

Fear of persecution for being a German, whether her own fear or her mother's, would certainly be part of her heritage. And if she thought of her father as a persecuting figure (rightly or wrongly is not an issue), and she knew her father to be Prussian, then it is by no means far-fetched for her to have wondered whether she might not be a Jew (either from her mother's side or through simply not knowing quite what a Jew was, but knowing they were persecuted). (14)

For me, what is most interesting about these critics' rationalizations of her Nazi/Jewish imagery is that they return her poems to autobiography, to the private and the individual, even while these metaphors seem to be attempting to expand her individual self mythically, historically and politically. By radically redefining herself in terms of a collective, an historical, and a public forum, Plath (whether justified or not) successfully unearths herself as a solitary, private individual. By partially identifying herself with the concentration camp Jew, she compares herself to a collective group; just as she identifies her father and husband who play the tormenting Nazis, as a part of a collective group. In so
doing, she spreads responsibility around, as if to suggest that hers is not an isolated, unique experience. She makes the issues global, turning them into shared cultural problems, instead of individual psychological ones.

"Daddy" re-stages secret family conflicts between parents and children, husbands and wives. It lifts a veil covering shameful social relations; and just as significantly, Plath 'talks back'. The opening lines of the poem vividly picture a claustrophobic domestic space, a "black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white". This space does not allow movement or speech ("Barely daring to breathe or Achoo"); she also makes plain that this world is hidden, underfoot. But the new theatre is external, a decidedly worldly place, full of worldly struggles and a worldly language: "Atlantic", "Polish town[s]", "wars", "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen", "The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna", "swastika[s]", "Fascist[s]", and so forth.

In "Daddy", the family writ large is not a contained unit, but rather divided in a life or death struggle. The German language, which in this case links up with Plath's understanding of other rationalizing discourses (hospital, mental institute), is associated with a repressive, mechanical power bearing down on its Other:

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

Plath formally emphasizes the word "obscene" here, by placing it at the end of the line, with an extra space following below. To her, "the language obscene" is the German language, but structurally, and self-consciously, it also points to and introduces her own words; as if to suggest, her situation may be "obscene", but so are her metaphors. Nonetheless, it is through such loud and dramatic comparisons that Plath reinforces and foregrounds human relationships as violent and grotesque spectacles. She forcefully transforms her individual, private relationships and experiences into collective, public ones. By stamping her emotions/images on cultural artifacts, historical documents, political landscapes, she shatters the silence surrounding family relations, and gives it a spectacular, public and collective currency. At the same time, by having to force the domestic into the public arena, she conversely highlights the fact that these relationships are 'normally' or 'naturally' regarded as private, individual, secret and closed.

Within this conflictual world, Plath, as I suggested earlier, 'talks back', fantasizing possible alternatives to
the pact of silence common among families. She not only occupies the position of speechlessness, but struggles to respond:

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
I could hardly speak.

Even though she might stutter—a shameful defect? a sign of veiling?—she does not hide her deficiency, but gives her fear and anger a voice. Her fixed "ich" may also be seen to mirror the stuttering repetition of the oppressor's language ("An engine, an engine" which "chuffs" out the same sound over and over again), revealing itself as a homogenizing, mechanical force. She responds in kind with her similarly aggressive "obscene" language: she speaks, most unladylike and crude, of her "Polack friend"; and she says to her father, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard". By speaking not only "the language obscene" but the actual German language ("Ich, Ich, Ich, Ich"), she demonstrates that even in escaping her oppressor's (male) language, she is bound by it, and still needs it to express herself. In fact, it may even suggest her complicity. Her underlying desire to be desired by her father ("Every
woman adores a fascist") has caused her, at some point or other, to play along in his game, and learn/speak his language—a controlled, rigid, precise language. After all, although her own feelings may be out of control or exaggerated even, her actual poetic style is highly controlled, terse and, despite her proclaimed struggle to communicate, extremely clear and straightforward. According to Alicia Ostriker, 

"[c]ontrol, impersonality, and dispassionateness are supposedly normative, masculine virtues" (88-89) and what characterize "the oppressor's language" (168), along with Plath's poetic style here. But by so sharply contrasting form and content in this way, Plath demonstrates both her imprisonment and her partnership in the oppressor's script.

Within these boundaries, she nevertheless fantasizes herself as powerful, or overpowering her tormentors, when she imagines herself killing them ("If I've killed one man, I've killed two---"), driving a stake into her father's heart. It is important to realize that, in the final act, she desires a collective judgement of this drama:

And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.

She is determined not to be alone in her condemnation of the Other. For her, this is a public, collective problem
deserving of a public, collective response, which she gives to it.

It should be noted, especially in the case of Plath whose biography has attracted so much attention, how she moves from the fictional universe to the 'real world'. Jacqueline Rose tells how an "old friend wrote Plath's mother on publication of the poem in the review of Ariel in Time in 1966 to insist that Plath's father had been nothing like the image in the poem" (229). As this quotation demonstrates, Plath's poems, whether she intends it or not, are often taken as a form of 'talk back' or 'back talk' and public display which reject the family code of silence. By making feelings and ideas public Plath risks a great deal. She risks being ostracized by her family and by a public anxious to preserve the status quo of middle-class family life.

In "Daddy", Plath reframes the private in terms of a public discourse, framing personal, family conflicts within larger cultural processes (language, homogenization, technology, politics). At the same time, she gives human faces to these large processes, and forces them into a dramatic, conflictual dialogue. As we have seen in previous chapters, Plath over and over again imagines the fragility of the self (very often feminized) being lost to inhuman, and specifically modern, processes of rationalization (i.e., where the self is 'paved over' by logic, statistics, uniformity etc., processes which are most often viewed, by her, as
patriarchal). For Plath, the rationalized worlds are seen as eliminating any form of public stage. In "Three Women", for example, conversation is driven underground in the face of the muting hospital environment. The party of three never speak to each other or anyone; the poem's sharp stanzaic divisions structurally divide one voice from the next. Against this absence of public forum, Plath in some of her later poems, stirs up a public debate, a debate between nonpublic and public types of discourse, between individual and collective experiences and responses.

In "Lady Lazarus", Plath puts her persona on display in theatrical and carnivalesque fashion before the "peanut-crunching crowd". The elements of a reified (dead) social matrix are resurrected, transformed once again into visible actors who are capable of disrupting the commodified world through dialogue and exposure: her "theatrical / Comeback in broad day". As in "Daddy", in part, the death she returns from is the commodification of her body. First, she is once again a persecuted Jew, marginalized and hidden. Secondly, her body has been stolen from her and divided into diverse, saleable objects. These body parts are owned and (re)constructed by the Nazis. Her skin, like an electric light source, is "Bright as a Nazi lampshade". Her foot has been fashioned into a lifeless "paperweight," and her face made into "a featureless, fine / Jew linen." The poem's frequently enjambed lines that appear to sharply break, and
yet link, each stanza of three, reflect these images of broken body parts.

Although Lady Lazarus bears witness to the fact that she is, in part, constructed, stamped, commodified, her theatrics resurrect a self (a speaker). She raises the commodity to a sort of "nakedness", so that herstory no longer belongs to the other. I use the word "nakedness", here, after John Berger, who writes: "To be naked is to be oneself" (54). Lady Lazarus tries to assume herself. Hence, she wants to elude a metaphorical "nudity" which Plath describes in poems like "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins". Berger opposes the terms "nudity" and "nakedness":

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The site of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) (54)

In both "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins" the female 'persona' is rendered obscenely "nude". She becomes a pure surface without voice. In "The Applicant", the wife is literally a piece of property, a "living doll", "that", or "it", as she is referred to, a "guaranteed", completely obedient slave, ready for purchase by the male customer:
It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.

The parallelism of these lines sets up the male as consumer to her object. The potential wife does not control her own body or actions. In "The Munich Mannequins", Plath takes the image of socially "tailored" woman to its extreme conclusion. The metaphorical mannequins experience no pleasure; they appear only for the pleasure of others--for the tailor who takes apart, dresses, and assembles 'her', and for the consumer who watches 'her'. These manufactured women are only for show, not even "living doll[s]" (my emphasis) that "can sew" or "cook" or "talk", as in "The Applicant".

The tension in these poems emerges from the stress of the repression of these selves. Their absolute objectification makes the pressures of their silence that much more painful. This is why Plath says that the mannequins are "Intolerable, without mind." The wife-product and the mannequins are, in a way, invisible spectacles. "To be on display", writes Berger, "is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded" (54). By removing mind so absolutely, though, Plath puts on display the women's "naked" and twisted corpses

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So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

which have been hidden, in part, by the fantasy that 'she wants it', desires the consuming male gaze. Plath leaves only body and, by doing so, makes it speak. The mannequins are "Orange lollies" (Lolita-like, innocently sexually seductive) on the "silver sticks" of men to be consumed. For Plath, the lack of mind ("Voicelessness", or the wife's script) is obscene. How can this object recover itself?; or as Irigaray puts it: "How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in

28 Let me add that often Plath's women are seduced into actually desiring their imprisonment--constrained not by iron chains, but by the chains of their own ideas (to borrow Foucault's description of the "ideal" modern convict). In this sense, Plath echoes Simone de Beauvoir, who writes: "Woman has been free only in becoming a captive; she renounces this human privilege in order to regain her power as a natural object" (188). In "The Rabbit Catcher", the persona herself, identifying with the rabbits, comes to realize that she is, at least in part, responsible for her own suffering: it is "my own blown hair" (my emphasis) which causes her to gag, but the impulse to enter this "place of force" is "too deep", she admits, for her "to uproot"... Various critics have made similar observations. Janice Markey writes on "Daddy": "Plath makes it clear in this poem that the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is in part due to women's compliance in the sado-masochism involved" (Journey 16). Pamela Annas also suggests that "one feels in reading 'The Applicant' that Plath sees herself and her imaged personae as not merely caught in--victims of--this situation, but in some sense culpable as well" (Disturbance 105).

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exchange in general?" (84). Plath answers with "Lady Lazarus".

Lady Lazarus, unlike the wife-product or the Munich mannequins, is both the subject and object of her own torture, a sort of talking veil or a material witnessing its own production. The emergence of the human face, to face the inhuman, creates an air of instability and scandal. A dramatic conflict emerges when the desires of the (female) object arise and revolt against what she is, a sort of envelope of death. She demands her own exposure, to have the skin-like napkin covering her peeled off:

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?---

This sounds like public torture which both titillates and threatens. She seductively conflates the prison camp world with the pornographic world, the world of male desire:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot---
The big strip tease.
The crowd has come to witness the effects of her suicide/attempted suicide, "an art, like everything else" that she does "exceptionally well." But they also act upon her, complicit in dissecting her body.

Plath's drama superimposes a public world over a world that keeps pain and death silent and secret. In this respect, "Lady Lazarus" echoes Foucault's strategic idealization, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), of pre-modern communal discourse. "Lady Lazarus" attempts to recover the ritual of the earliest model of punishment by replacing what Foucault describes as modern day's "coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model of the power to punish" with the earlier "representative, scenic, signifying, public, collective model" (131). One of the points of Foucault's long, drawn-out description, in the opening of his book, of Damiens the condemned is to show first how the body was highly symbolized. Secondly, the condemned man was also part of a theatrical battle between the king he has offended and himself. Power is on display before the community. According to Foucault, this life-and-death struggle was highly unstable, so that the condemned man, by addressing the crowd, might persuade them into taking his side, and attacking the judges. Plath also introduces a symbolic ritual wherein she can present the body as evidence, and wherein she can directly address the crowd. Each piece of her is flagrantly on show in much the same way as the earliest condemned criminals were on
display during public tortures and executions. Rather than kept cleanly and quietly contained and hidden, as in modern methods of imprisonment, the damage done to her is brought out into full view before the public:

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bones,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

Executions often allow for the convict's 'last words'; and the idea of 'last words' suggests a unique potency here. Like a convict before his execution, Lady Lazarus, under the protection of her own death, can say anything. She has nothing left to lose, since nothing remains of her to punish or prohibit. In this respect, she occupies a position of strength, power, and privilege which makes her all the more fascinating and attractive to her witnesses. Hence, as Foucault argues, the public execution condemns while it glorifies the criminal. The person we watch facing his or her death is remarkable for simply doing so, while the crime that got him or her there, especially if considered monstrous, suggests the work of an exceptional nature. For Foucault, the
value of this situation is that there is something in plain sight that is at stake. The witnesses are participants in the execution. They are even "the possible and indirect victim[s] of this execution" (68), as they may admire or identify with the criminal. So just as a whole aspect of the carnival played within the public execution "which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince" (61), the status quo here is put at risk: authority may be mocked and the criminal transformed into a hero. In fact, in this case, she actually orchestrates this public performance of her own death.

Plath's position also bears striking resemblance to the situations of self-flagellating female mystics in the late middle ages. According to Laurie Finke in Feminist Theory, Women's Writing (1992), female orthodox mystics would ritualistically inflict excessive pain on themselves; and, in doing so, appropriate cultural representations of their bodies. "She assumes for herself the power to define the authority that represses her sexuality: not man, but God" (96); interestingly, just as these mystics claimed divine authority ("'My me is God', wrote Catherine of Genoa; Hadewijch of Brabant wished 'to be God with God'; Angela of Foligno wrote that 'the Word was made flesh to make me God'" [94]), so Plath wrote in her Diary on November 13, 1949: "I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God'" (cited Introduction, Letters Home: 40). This position, in turn, is
reminiscent of Jean Paul Sartre's understanding of man's desire to be God (see Essays in Existentialism 69-73). Sartre argues that man's impulse to possess a particular woman is a transference of his desire to lay hold of a world in its entirety. Could Plath's desire, then, to possess herself as 'woman' reflect her desire to be God? Like the self-flagellating mystic, she becomes in her poetry both the object and subject, both the one who is scarred and the one who scars. As we saw in "Daddy", for example, she is both the one who stutters ("talks like a Jew") and the master of the language (often "obscene") she produces so impressively: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe". Ultimately, like the female mystic, she achieves representational power at the point that she seems ready (at least metaphorically) to annihilate herself. Just as the mystic poached upon the authority of the Church and State in her self-inflicted torture, so Plath usurps the technologies that control, construct, and harm her represented bodies. Within the context of the poem, it is she who inflicts pain and mythologizes her self, not the larger institutions of, say, marriage or the Church. This is a bit pathological (and understandable) like the neurotic who identifies with death--either as abject victim or as sadistic destroyer--in order to understand and master it.

Lady Lazarus's potency comes in part from her having risked death and, therefore, becoming impervious to the
threats of male power; ironically, death is one of her theatrical tricks. It shocks and encourages an audience to read the writing on her body (which one assumes will later be the writing of her poetry). Death is for her "an art," a "call[ing]" which she does "exceptionally well." It brings her body into the "broad day" as spectacle, "the theatrical". In part, Plath achieves this poetically by delivering parallel constructions that encourage each short, quick, condensed line to stumble into the next, mimicking the hectic intensity of both this spectacular event and the power of the persona's thoughts:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart---
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
This "miracle" of death and rebirth obviously echoes the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. In fact, the persona's words, "These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bones, // Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman" echo Christ's words in the New Testament: "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39). By drawing such parallels, Plath transforms this already spectacular event into the most dramatic, communal, and historical of all public executions. In comparing herself to Christ at the Cross (just as she identified herself with the Jews), she loudly and irreverently forces her personal, private self into the public realm. She is not one person being executed, but a collective, in much the same way that Christ is said to die for the sins of all. It is not just one person who is responsible but, especially in this case, everyone. As well, the story she echoes, like the story of Lazarus, is from a patriarchal text which again emphasizes her entrapment (and complicity) in the language and thoughts of her oppressor.

At the same time, she is able to gain power by inverting the Cartesian 'I' of traditional poetics. Just as she parodies the Christ story, so she parodies the fully, self-conscious, 'male' poet. Instead of thinking in terms of internalized reflections or meditations, Plath begins with the production of her body, its textualization. She is first of
all body parts: "the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth". Thereafter, she explores what that body means to her as a thinking person; or more accurately, she seems to let the body parts speak their meanings ('I have a body, therefore I am'). She is the actress, the freak, the criminal, the rebel ("Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air"), and the saint (with her sought after bodily artifacts). But she also represents the body as reduced to statistic, quantity or elements, as in the following, chilling lines:

Ash, ash--
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there---

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Plath's death camp metaphor (the cake of soap made from the body, the gold taken from the teeth) shows the persona's body as violently disembodied, and as lacking all self-possession or unity. Her body, here, belongs to an exterior power which values it best as dead, whether as fragmented and refashioned into useful commodities (soap, a lampshade, . . .), or as, according to another script, resurrected into martyrdom for
the salvation of others. And yet, behind the violent commodification, Plath hints at non-rationalized social relations: the self-possessed body (behind the "cake of soap"), displays of wealth and status ("A gold filling"), and a symbol of community and ceremony ("A wedding ring"). She endeavours to put on display both commodification and the traces of human community that commodification still exhibits—that which resists complete assimilation, and can act as a sign counter to the given set of relations. "Lady Lazarus" seems to be an attempt at self-possession in a woman who has lost her body to a non-communal, rationalized society.

Plath's focus on public display and community is not limited to her controversial Death Camp poems. Her sequence of bee poems vividly develop and clarify her concerns with ceremony, resurrection, and the disappearance of communal life, without the excess or obscenity. Her interest is not so much with 'self' as with a public, collective discourse that might resist assimilation. Naturally, the hive, as commodified, is an apt metaphor for the kind of homogenizing, overly ordered world she fears absorbs human difference. She calls the hive a "machine" in "Stings". This metaphor specifically suggests narrow controls placed over women. (Plath moves back and forth between identifying with the bees and having them as signs of women):
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin

Here, in "Stings" (the central and best poem of the bee sequence), the bees are "women", "unmiraculous women" as opposed to the "miraculous" Lady Lazarus. Amidst the thinly veiled sexual imagery, the persona's own sexuality is, like the servile female bees, reduced to a function (or the "intensely practical" of "The Swarm"), a useful and docile body. "Here is my honey-machine," she says, which seems to refer to her possession of the hive and at the same time the dispossession of her body--and her soul. Perhaps the persona's uncertain assertions of ownership are a feeble attempt to recover the self within a world where sexual commodification reigns.

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the persona, as another version of a queen, claims authority ("They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner") over her chattel (her "export"). In this instance, objectification is an attempt to reassure oneself. But, in fact, she fears their power ("the
swarmy feeling of African hands") to transform her into an object of their desire. Aside from the assertion of ownership, perhaps an impossibility for women, the persona fantasizes her own disappearance:

There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,  
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately  
In my moon suit and funeral veil.

She wonders if the bees "would forget" her if she "stood back and turned into a tree." In order to avoid assimilation into the other (male's) desire, the persona would make her sexuality invisible.

The notion of possession in "Stings" is central. She tells us: "I am in control". But she also falls onto the side of the owned and objectified. The speaker's sense of separation from the bee world and its metaphorical implications is tenuous; hence the semi-conscious, fluid merging and separation from it. We may wonder, then, just how much queenly authority the queen bee (the "reborn" woman writer) really has; just how much "she is reborn with a mind and a purpose of her own, distinct from the slave mentality of the hive" (Bundtzen 185). Although this is how Lynda Bundtzen positively describes the queen at the end of "Stings", even
Bundtzen, nonetheless, adds that in bee hives, and for that matter in beekeeping, it is almost impossible to determine who rules whom: "Do the queen and the keeper rule, or are they 'lot drawn scapegoats' for the hive?" (179). Plath echoes this sentiment in "The Bee Meeting" when she asks: "Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold"? In "Wintering", she concludes: "Possession. / It is they who own me".

Significantly, nature and culture slide into each other in the bee poems. The 'all-natural', fixed condition of the hive, in which "There are no windows, . . . no exit" ("The Arrival of the Bee Box"), is a wonderful image of the hold which those in power have over their inhabitants. It seems utterly natural; and yet, Plath points out how "this clean wood box" ("The Arrival of the Bee Box"), that is the hive, is a human product: "It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers" ("Wintering"). It is a machinery superimposed on nature in order to rob it of its precious gold, and yet the inhabitants cannot help that their actions are entirely natural (and therefore right). The hive's disciplinary power as a "machine" that "will work without thinking" ("Stings") is exercised through its invisibility to consciousness.

It is worth mentioning "The Rabbit Catcher" in this respect, since the ex-centricity of social forces is there so brilliantly illustrated. As with the bee poems, Plath has much to say about how social power masks itself. In "The
Rabbit Catcher", the machinery of Nature is the apparent
villain, while the actual, cultural architect of the killings
is, for the most part, invisible, exterior to the
rabbit's/woman's consciousness. The persona of "The Rabbit
Catcher" has no perspective on her landscape:

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,
The paths narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaced themselves--
Zeros, shutting on nothing,

Set close, like birth pangs.

The landscape casts a lulling spell on consciousness, and on
the consciousness of the reader. Plath's "l"s, "m"s and "n"s
create a seductive, dreamy, liquid atmosphere which suddenly
gives way to the harsh, scratchy "s" sounds of the last three
lines. The reality of woman's position in family life (the
trap of pregnancy) is wrapped in an impenetrable, pleasurable
fantasy. Traditionally, for women, marriage fantasies have
not been something to question. In popular culture, woman is
most often seen as setting a trap for the male, to seduce him
into the bonds of marriage (the "only one place to get to"?)

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Yet Plath reverses the popular mystification wherein males are the victims; she envisions the absent rabbit catcher as he waits for his traps to work:

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.

The rabbit catcher sits inside, like a male Hera, in a heavy, dreary kingdom of domesticity waiting to trap women. The flat, monosyllabic line, "I felt hands round a tea mug, dull blunt," made heavy by the short "u" sounds, is associated with the trapper and contrasts with the quick short, then long, "i"s that dominate the following line, "Ringing the white china", that identifies the rabbits. And yet, by the next line, the rabbits, "those little deaths", have in part lost their quickness, having acquired the trapper's dullness: the word "little" picks up the tone of the previous line, but "deaths" echoes "dull". One great strength of Plath's poetry is again demonstrated in these lines: how she moves easily between system (the multitude of female 'victims', the lack of visible intention in the social machinery of the traps) and individual (the "dull" trapper), and how she puts a human face to abstract social formations. Furthermore, as with the bee

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poems, Plath's poetic setting blurs the borders between nature and culture as if to show the difficulty of separating one from the other, the difficulty of discovering a view of the whole.

In order to counter the ideology of 'naturalness', Plath in the bee poems, constantly shifts perspectives. She will show the bees as bees, doing what bees do. She will also show how they are women doing what women do, or people doing what bees do (i.e., the townspeople as they become indistinct drones). Now they are framed as her possession. Now she is possessed along with them. Now the bees appear as nature's creatures. Now they appear as property, as politically organized. These perspectival shifts, particularly in "Stings", are deliberately disorienting. There is never any idealized hive off in the woods free from exploitation. Nature and culture are enmeshed here, and deceptively so.

In "Stings", we find that the speaker seems to think that she is like the lost queen. She claims she is "no drudge", trying to distance her image from the indistinguishable mob of female drudges caught up in their mindless industry (like the speaker who on another level is in the market: buying honey and being a honey-machine). But the next lines suggest that she is, in fact, a drudge: ". . . for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair. // And seen my strangeness evaporate". Her hair has lost its lustre, as she imagines the queen's has:
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush---
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.

Both the speaker and her imaginary queen have lost their marks of distinction, the veils (image, language) which transform the "honey-machine" (commodified sexuality, female stereotypes) into something else, a richer symbolic world, perhaps.

Much has been made by critics of Plath's images of the queen bee. Judith Kroll writes that, "[i]dentification of the true self with the sacred queenship assures escape from drudgery" (149). Given the claustrophobia and bleakness of Plath's worlds, Kroll's reading is an attractive temptation. For in her reading of "Stings", Kroll gives great weight to the lines, "I / Have a self to recover, a queen." The standard critical reading, typified by Kroll, maintains that Plath's "false" self resides within the body of the drudge, while her "true" identity is located in the body of the "independent" queen bee. According to this reading, the queen bee represents a self which has gained prestige and power. She is the centre of the hive, its life support and future. Kroll characterizes the creature as "magical[ly] self-
sufficient" (119). What this reading must overlook is that the queen is essentially an immobile, reproductive body. Unlike the males, the queen does not fly outside the hive to work or play. Plath's attitude in the bee poems is closer to Simone de Beauvoir's who warns that "we must be careful to note that the presence of a woman chief or queen at the head of a tribe by no means signifies that women are sovereign therein" (71).

Two overlapping perspectives dominate the bee poems: the invisibility of social controls as they produce individuals, and the crushing effects this invisibility can have, especially on women, who have been locked up in the privacy of the home. The queen bee is nothing but natural; her exclusive purpose for existing is biological reproduction, and almost all of her existence is invisible, in darkness. It bears comparison to the internal space described in "Wintering". In this bee poem, Plath speaks of the "heart of the house", comparable to the queen's space in the hive, as if part of a horror show. She says:

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light
The deathly nature of this space has an oppressive positive presence. Its darkness reflects the darkness of the bees' (women's) minds; they are body or blank mind, only: they are "too dumb to think" ("Wintering"), having "black intractable mind[s]" and "dumb, banded bodies" ("The Swarm"). In the centre of the house all she has to perceive with is "the torch and its faint // Chinese yellow on appalling objects---" ("Wintering").

The world of the hive exemplifies function, homogeneity, exchange--and invisibility. It ploughs over other more public styles of culture, wherein human beings embodied a communal writing. In opposition to the homogenizing world, Plath refers us back to an obsolete universe of romance and royalty, and its archaic language, the discourse that once permeated her poetry. She speaks of "knights in visors", "Breastplates", "armory", "a duel", "the magician's girl" ("The Bee Meeting"), "queen[s]" and "virgins" ("The Bee Meeting" and "Stings"), "gauntlets", "The mausoleum" ("Stings"),29 "The gilt and pink domes of Russia", "a tod of ivy" (my emphasis "The Swarm"), "Maids and the long royal lady" ("Wintering"). This language, however, never quite gels, and seems to recede before what might be called 'hive-discourse'. Consider, for example, these lines from "The Bee

29 In a previous manuscript of "Stings", she also spoke of "junked statues" and "heroes". See note 179 of the Collected Poems.

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Meeting": "Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors, / Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits." The romantic, royal image of "knights in visors" is secondary to the dominating image of lacklustre homogeneity suggested by the "nodding . . . square black head[s]" of the bees; and even the particularity of their "Breastplates" is undercut by the mundane description of them as "cheesecloth"-like. Hence, for me, the important final stanza of "Stings", marking the queen's flight, illustrates an unequal juxtaposition:

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her---
The mausoleum, the wax house.

On the one hand, Plath presents the powerful, mechanical social world "that killed her", and on the other hand she presents an alienated sign (the queen) dislodged from any supporting discourse and, therefore, virtually meaningless. To survive, the queen needs the complex of signs (knights, virgins, maids, heroes, etc.) that give her world meaning. The intensity of the flight might suggest a radical break from the hive, but it also suggests that she will burn out like a roman candle. Nevertheless, the moment of 'freedom', however

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temporary, does oppose the deathly world that surrounds her. The queen's is a spectacular rupture which hints at the value of the visible, as well as bringing into focus the mortification inflicted by the hive. Social death—or more accurately, the social world as a form of death—appears in all the bee poems. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box" we are told that the hive looks like a "coffin", and the speaker wears what she imagines as a "funeral veil" when around it. In "The Bee Meeting" she wears "a black veil that molds to [her] face", while "the circle of hives" is in a "barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children", and in "Stings", of course, the "mausoleum" is filled with corpses; and, one might add, "the wax house" echoes a wax museum filled with static reproductions.

The rich symbolic worlds of both romantic royalty and historical military culture are erased from the contemporary body (politic). "The Swarm", for example, is full of lustrous signs of the heroic, of "charioteers", "the Grand Army", "Napoleon", the "badge of victory", "The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals", "honor". These images of epic battles absurdly elevate the "dumb" swarm ("So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder. // It thinks they are the voice of God"). In fact, the bees are, here, an indistinct mass, "in their black ball, / A flying hedgehog, all prickles." The military language was, like the language of romance and royalty, a form of public writing, based on obsolete ideas of 'honour',

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'bravery', 'loyalty', 'nobility'. In this discourse pomp, ceremony and ritual contrast with the functionalist "hived station" and its mechanical course: "Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs, / Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country."

The uniform of the bee keeper covers the body and its prior dressing. The uniform masks desire as we saw in "The Arrival of the Bee Box": "They might ignore me immediately / In my moon suit and funeral veil". The bee hunters mimic the monotony of the bees with their own monotonous costumes: "In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection, / And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?" ("The Bee Meeting"). At this point, the persona still has a distinct and vulnerable body. If the bees are read as desire (whether the object or the subject of desire), this might be viewed as an allegory about how commodification is an effort to control desire--the sweetness of the honey, the passions embodied in the bees. The bees translate into signs of body (the queen) and dangerous emotion (i.e., not necessarily tamable by rationalization and exchange). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", they are associated with a "swarmy feeling", "a Roman mob", and she "wonder[s] how hungry they are." In "The Bee Meeting", they desire the body, as she hopes they will not be attracted to her, "will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear." This is the fear of the other's desire and of one's own fear of 'getting stung'. Like the bees in their role as cyphers,
the novice persona is assimilated: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them." In "The Swarm", in another image of containment, the bees themselves are caught ("The swarm is knocked into a cocked straw hat"), just as the persona is in "The Bee Meeting", which again insists upon the comparison between the bees and the people, the people and the bees.

What is striking about all this is how the uniformity of the uniform makes differentiation within a community disappear. The discourse of romance and royalty is nostalgically lost, as is the military discourse. The simple community and a public stage are dissolved into a disorienting abstraction. The persona of "The Bee Meeting" wonders what is going on:

Is it some operation that is taking place?  
It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for,  
This apparition in a green helmet,  
Shining gloves and white suit.  
Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?

Notice how this description makes prominent the medical discourse that has preoccupied Plath, and which is for her always on the side of an oppressive, controlling machinery.
The medical allusions contribute to the effect of uniformity which covers the public world. She cannot read the 'community' before her eyes. The villagers are removed from their places of work. Their styles of clothing, which might sort out occupation and identity, are made identical. This is a new type of community built on safety and sameness. The title "The Bee Meeting" suggests that the villagers are the bees meeting together, mirroring "The mind of the hive", to create a hive-culture.

The first line of the poem brings this point home: "Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers--- / The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for the bees." The persona names them not because she can identify them, but because they must be these characters, the members of the village. In opposition to "The mind of the hive" these village figures, in particular the rector, the midwife, and the sexton, represent communal relationships, which transcend economic concerns. The midwife, who is an image of female, non-medicalized care, represents a direct relation to female bodies, as well as Life. The figure of the rector, a spiritual leader, exemplifies public communication and leadership. The sexton, the caretaker of the dead, embodies reverence for the dead, continuity with spiritual life, and tradition. Each of these figures, in some way or other, represents forms of public care, ceremony and ritual, which have been covered over by the uniform hive-culture.
What is lost behind the white-out of the bee-garb is a traditional, visible text which these villagers represent, and which at least affords the possibility of decipherment, interpretation and address (or redress).

The image of the bee hunters resembles many of Plath's previous images of anti-communal separation and containment: in plaster casts, bourgeois houses, rabbit traps, hive-cells, or the hive itself ("snug as a Virgin"), death camp cells, hospital beds, coffins, tombs, and so forth. Here, an organic community is divided into cells (private spaces, often) and then ruled according to a programmatic logic—like the internalized blueprints that guide the bees' lives. Of course the hive itself is often shown to be controlled by forces beyond the bees. In "The Swarm", for example, the origin of control is incomprehensible to the bees; it comes from the "Pom! Pom!" of the gun belonging to "a man of business". Dialogue or questioning of the given world and its invisible centres of control is extremely difficult. For Plath, the military and romance/royal discourses, as well as the discourses of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", attempt to recover the presence of controls so that they might be addressed, interrogated, or at the very least witnessed. This visibility offers the possibility of destabilizing power: "Lady Lazarus", as we have seen, puts a human face on a collective and dehumanizing process and then aggressively addresses that very process: i.e., this is not just the subject and object coming
together, but the silent objectified-oppressed becoming subject and addressing the centres of power. Her body is a collection of social artifacts; her body contains history and addresses history, but not piece-meal. This is part of her making visible.

In "The Bee Meeting", Plath unveils the community and shows its inhabitants differentiated, but in close contact: "The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands." She seems to think that the evidence is there to be dredged up and condensed into a sensible shape. In "Lady Lazarus", that means a human form. These poems work out where power can be located, as well as pointing out how this society has changed from an organic community to a 'serial' one within which the self cannot gain a view of the whole. Plath stands outside, views, and addresses the very community she silently, passively inhabited. She identifies the incomprehension, fragmentation, and commodification, and challenges all of this by suggesting points of differentiation and a humanized, public community.
Conclusion: Turning the Confession Inside Out

I have tried to show that Plath desires a self that is in dialogue with her culture. It is a self with voice. Her late poetry is an active and aggressive demonstration of her urgent wish to engage with a world that is unavailable to her. In her effort to generate dialogue, she unearths a fluid, porous body/poetic space, and recovers public ceremony and spectacle. She makes visible that which has been hidden. By juxtaposing the flat, sterile, homogenous, functional, white or invisible ground with a spectacular fluid, public display, Plath stimulates a plurality of voices that takes us out of the limits of the individual and the family to that of the larger cultural arena. She does not work towards closure, whether that be a reconciliation or a transcendence of the world, but merely reacts to her world. She is remarkable in her willingness to leave the world and the self at odds, the wounds gaping, and the self split. She works to expose--situate and critique--this serial, functional, cultural field and her place within it. Plath's self in most of her late poems is situated within, and rarely transcends, the cultural ground.

It is for this reason that I have advocated reading Plath's poetry as cultural critique, rather than as self-actualization or individual psychological critique--the more usual method of analysis applied to a reading of Plath. The
sensationalism surrounding her death and subsequent plethora of biographical material have contributed to the wealth of readings dedicated either to justifying what critics see as personal rage, or to judging and condemning her as emotionally imbalanced. The focus in each case is on analyzing the individual, psychological mind-set of Plath or her persona. Certainly, recent critics (Jacqueline Rose, Susan Van Dyne, Janice Markey) have recognized problems with this prevailing biographical approach to reading Plath. Markey, for one, writes in *A New Tradition* (1985) "that biographical criticism, with its disproportionate emphasis on her suicide and its depiction of Plath as a neurotic, provides a distorted interpretation of her work" (22), and that "certain critics have used what has passed as biographical data for their own one-sided interpretations of her poetry" (163), whether it be used to exalt her as a martyr for female oppression, or as a sign of what they see as her schizoid personality.

Nevertheless, in the end, Rose, Van Dyne, and Markey have each tended to psychologize Plath's material. Markey argues that "[i]n comparison to Anne Sexton and a great many other contemporary writers, Plath deals with a much larger area of human experience" (34), but Markey still limits her readings of the poetry to those private issues surrounding Plath: intimate, familial relationships; personal suffering; and her death. Once again, the concern is with unfolding the "real" or desired self within Plath's verse, which has the effect, I
believe, of limiting the seriousness with which she undertook to interpret human experience within the larger context of history.

In an October 30, 1962 interview, Plath speaks of her attraction to the poetry of Lowell and Sexton, for its exploration of "peculiar, private and taboo subjects" (Orr 168). Critics seeking a personal, psychological reading of Plath often draw attention to this statement of hers. However, within this same interview she qualifies her words:

I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife . . . I think that the personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (169-170)

She describes herself as "a political person" (169) with an overriding interest in larger, social issues: "I am not a historian, but I find myself being more and more fascinated by history and now I find myself reading more and more about history" (169). Elsewhere, she reaffirms her wider focus: "The issues of our time which occupy me at the moment are the..."
incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America" (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams 92). As Plath herself seems to suggest, her poetry is less personal or confessional, than it is cultural confessional.

Though (as critics have noted almost from the moment it was coined) the term "confessional" has been more misleading than useful, Plath nevertheless is frequently grouped under the rubric of Confessional Poet. In an attempt to rescue these poets from charges of narcissism, some have renamed them autobiographical poets, as does Carmen Birkle in Women's Stories of the Looking Glass (1996). She argues that women poets have written themselves into their poems as a psychological means for self-affirmation, and in this respect their poetry is autobiographical. Still, the characteristics are generally the same as those defining confessional poetry. In the first book-length study on the subject, Robert Phillips describes confessional poetry as "written with the Self as primary subject, the Self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint" (4). The confessional style "is most often narrative" (16) and "[t]he themes are more often than not domestic or intimate ones" (9). Phillips explains: "The poet strives for personalization rather than for universalization" (17) in pursuit of "self-therapy and a
certain purgation" (8). This "ego-centered" (8) poetry or "preoccupation with Self, . . . and fierce concentration on intensely personal themes" (7) developed as a reaction against the Modernism of Auden and Eliot "who consciously strove all but to obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems (4). According to Phillips, a "true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self" (8). It follows, then, that "[t]he language of the confessional poem is that of ordinary speech" (9).

It is just these generally accepted characteristics of confessional or autobiographical poetry (its "direct approach" [10] and "[e]ver probing into the Self" [15]) that are lacking in Plath's poetry as I have interpreted it. Among her best poems, rather than establishing a solid sense of self or a transcendental one (whether self present ego or mythic being), Plath draws an image of a persona that is integrally connected to cultural systems (i.e. discourses, images, institutions). Her speaker often fuses and disappears into her surroundings. For example, in "The Bee Meeting" and "The Arrival of the Bee Box" the persona, fearing the wrath of the bees, blends into nature. Even in those places where the persona remains distinct and viable, it is difficult to settle on her exact identity, as we have seen; in each of the bee poems the persona may be associated with a number of opposing images (drone, queen, beekeeper). As well, the identity of those she
addresses is confused, hence confusing the narrative as a whole. For example, can the present in "A Birthday Present" be concretely identified? Is it death, or a man, or is it her own reflection, or an image of the perfect woman? Can we be sure she is discussing her father in "Daddy", or is this really a poem about her husband? Plath refuses to satisfy us with solid ego identifications. David Holbrook notes his frustration in dealing with such confusion: "we cannot understand her poetry well, and at times not at all" (5). But rather than reading this as Plath revelling in her neurosis, as Holbrook does, I see this ambivalence as her way of universalizing her position. Instead of framing individual egos, she offers collective experiences. In this way, the birthday present is a more generalized cultural desire or Other, and Daddy is a more generalized father/husband/man. Thoughts of her father trigger thoughts of her husband and visa versa, but what dominates is their larger identification with Nazism.

Thus, rather than "psychologizing one's experience" (Ramakrishnan 18), it has been my argument that Plath's interest is in detailing the elements/structures that produce the self, as well as critiquing her "white" culture's attempts to limit otherness: other voices, languages, images, rituals, styles. She achieves this in part by working against the development of a clear narrative directed by a distinct self. By complicating both the narrative and the identity of the
self, the subject is no longer the Self but the larger cultural field. It is this turning of the confession inside out, unveiling the cultural rather than the internal self—the cultural in the self—that makes Plath unique among those poets with whom she is most commonly associated. I am thinking in particular, here, of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sharon Olds, each of whom I will be speaking of, in turn.

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* strikingly exhibits those recognized confessional characteristics, while distinguishing itself from what we have seen of Plath's poetry. Whereas Plath in her poetry enacts a split between her self and the world, Lowell's split self remains more personal, dividing his child-self from his adult-self. In "Night Sweat", Lowell writes: "always inside me is the child who died, / always inside me is his will to die--". Steven Axelrod explains: "the authorial awareness includes both the consciousness of the remembered child and that of the remembered adult poet" (*Robert* 115-116). The emphasis is always on the self, as Katherine Wallingford reiterates: "Robert Lowell . . . knew that no matter where truth may lie, the search for it must be conducted within the self" (137). She argues that Lowell tries to find some self-unity in the work of art, that "in a more self-conscious way than any of our other great poets, he sought to discover himself in his poetry" (12).
Indeed, Lowell is most generally recognized as the first of the modern confessional poets, introducing the movement is 1956 with the publication of Life Studies. Structurally, Lowell's poems are "direct, easily understandable . . . the antithesis of all that was witty and obscure" (Phillips 5). His poems usually contain a straightforward 'story', narrated by a self at least partially detached from the events told. Consider the opening of his poem "For George Santayana":

In the heydays of 'forty-five,
bus-loads of souvenir-deranged
G.I.'s and officer-professors of philosophy
came crashing through your cell,
puzzled to find you still alive,
free-thinking Catholic infidel,
stray spirit, who'd found
the church too good to be believed.

This poem is not unusual for Lowell in its clear and regular use of precise, local and cultural references. His simple, idiomatic language, coupled with specific, personal details give the impression of a realistic narrative delivered by a more or less unified self (contra so many of Plath's personae). Most of Lowell's poems, especially those about events or places ("July in Washington", "Buenos Aires", "Dropping South: Brazil", "New York 1962: Fragment", "For the
Union Dead") read much like poetic reports on historic events. "For George Santayana", along with similar poems such as "Ford Madox Ford", "To Delmore Schwartz", "Words for Hart Crane", "Alfred Corning Clark", "Hawthorne", and "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts" appear to be written primarily in memory or recognition of these literary or historical figures. Among his other poems, his dedications to poets and/or friends (Elizabeth Bishop, Esther Brooks, Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, Harriet Winslow) again reinforce both a literary and a personal subject matter that removes the poem and the persona from larger societal issues. Whereas Plath's poetry, even where describing personal experiences, progresses outward, to transform into cultural critique, Lowell's poetry, even when grounded in historical events, is more of an intimate psychological review, than an outwardly social one. His poetry always stems from, or returns to, the self, as Helen Vendler suggests, as well, in her reading: "Lowell is . . . using the lens of his own inner life through which to see Boston's history" (Given 17). She explains, for example, that "For the Union Dead" is "a poem about a Civil War hero, Robert Gould Shaw, whose sister Josephine had married one of Lowell's ancestors, Charles Russell Lowell. . . . The poem is thus, though undeclaredly, a family poem" (13).

Like Lowell, Anne Sexton's "nakedly autobiographical poems" (73), as Robert Phillips describes them, critique the inner life. The subject matter (mental breakdown, sex,
addiction, abortion) remains personal to her. Her poems rarely expand to consider larger social systems, but remain "so much a piece of the life" (Phillips 74), imbedded in the realm of childhood recollection, self-realization, and eventually self-affirmation:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside after considerable digging
I found the answer. ("Live")

Generally, her poems are about family and friends. Phillips argues that they are "more accurately autobiographical than most, including Lowell" (75). In "All My Pretty Ones", she invokes her father: "Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you." In "The Double Image" she speaks to her daughter, Linda: "I made you to find me." As in Lowell's poems, Sexton's specific naming of these individuals reinforces her poetry as personal and private exploration. In other poems, she will address her other daughter (Joyce), her Great Aunt (Nana), her mother (Mary Gray), her doctor, or her friends (Maxine Kumin, John Holmes) with the aim of trying to reconnect herself with each of them. Her poems from Transformations (1971) deviate somewhat from this usual practice to reenact fairy tale stories and fables, but still always with a focus on how they relate to her personally. Recognizing this tendency to always
return to her self as the subject, Sexton said in 1969: "about a year ago, I decided I was the 'only confessional poet. . . . I hold back nothing" (qtd. in Phillips 76). In her most interesting exploratory poems from Transformations, Live or Die (1966), and Love Poems (1969) she speaks in a way Plath never would--not as a sufferer of madness, but as a survivor:

in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.

("In Celebration of my Uterus")

More recently, Sharon Olds speaks from the position of survivor as well, confronting issues of sexuality and family dynamics in overtly direct terms (see Satan Says 1980, The Dead and the Living 1984). Her diction is simple and colloquial, less 'literary'. Compared to her confessional predecessors her work reads like a (deceptively) straightforward autobiographical testimony, whose objective style is dramatically charged by the intensity of the experiences she describes. The result is objectivity immersed in emotional intensity. However, similar to the narrative of Lowell and Sexton, Olds's undoubtedly brilliant poems revolve around a more or less unified self. Her experiences and extreme feelings unfold in an accessible narrative. Furthermore,
unlike Plath's poetry, but consistent with confessional poetry, the issues presented are kept at the level of the family--Olds's primary focus, as she suggests in "Possession":

You think I left--I was the child
who got away, thousands of miles,
but not a day goes past that I am not
turning someone into you.

In "The Takers", Olds compares her sister to Hitler, but unlike in Plath's "Daddy" Hitler is not raised to the level of a character within the poem. For Olds, Hitler functions as a simile, not as a direct correspondence. Her aim seems much like Sexton's in her desire to expose the pain inflicted by the family, and then to show her individual self as a survivor within it, as she writes in "That Year":

every night, I was one of those
about to be killed. It had happened to six million Jews, to Jesus's family
I was not in--and not everyone
had died, and there was a word for them
I wanted, in my ignorance,
to share some part of, the word survivor.
Whereas Plath lives the nightmare, telling us that she is one of the concentration camp Jews, Olds reflects upon Auschwitz ("in my dreams") from a distance:

and in Social Studies, we came at last
to Auschwitz, in my ignorance
I felt as if I recognized it
like my father's face, the face of a guard
turning away--or worse yet:
turning toward me.

With her use of "as if" and "like", the analogy remains at the level of just that--an analogy.

Where Plath starts with the family and moves outward to make her pain collective, Olds plucks the individual from her place in the outside world and returns her to the family. Plath's descriptions of the family incite her to draw conclusions regarding the culture at large. Olds's thoughts, on the other hand, move in reverse, from the cultural to the domestic. Elements in the larger cultural field remind her of her family. In "The Derelict", for example, the sight of the (public) derelict causes Olds to reflect on her brother:

... I see the ingot of his beard,
and think of my younger brother, his beauty,
coinage and voltage of his beard, his life
he is not using, like a violinist whose
hands have been crushed so he cannot play—
I who was there at the crushing of his hands
and helped to crush them.

In "Late Speech with My Brother", the equation again moves
from the social ground to the personal: "I can see you /
sending your body to hell as they sent us to / bed without
supper". Olds moves backward, in a sense, to find out the
cause of her brother's worldly failures. The answer, for her,
resides in their family. Her scars "honor the power of the
fire" ("Burn Center") which is, for her, the family. By
contrast, Plath's exposed scars--which, unlike Olds, Lowell,
or Sexton, always lack the feeling of the personal, never seem
to belong to a specific human being--are an attack upon the
larger cultural field.

As a radical feminist and activist, it stands to reason
that Adrienne Rich focuses on the larger world, and therefore
might be most similar to Plath in this regard (see Diving into
the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972). In fact Rich, in a more
politically charged fashion than Plath, does criticize
patriarchal culture: "The tragedy of sex / lies all around us
... A man's world. But finished. / They themselves have
sold it to the machines" ("Waking in the Dark"). She appeals,
with a collective voice ("we"), to society at large: "never
have we been closer to the truth / of the lies we are living,
listen to me" ("When We Dead Awaken"). Rich's poetry is characteristicly full of wonderfully liberating images, as if one were casting off repressive weights, reclaiming a primordial, rugged individualism. Carmen Birkle tells us about Rich: "her life and her work cannot be separated from each other" (120); as a confessional poet "[t]he autobiographical mode is essential for her writing" (120). Hers is a poetry "concerned with self exploration and self-definition" (119) before it is visionary. For her, social change originates in a change of individual consciousness. As with the poetry of Olds and Sexton, her poetry becomes a means for survival ("From a Survivor" reads one of her titles) and a means for discovering this inner world of women:

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth

("Diving into the Wreck")

Rich makes the individual self primary, where Plath's poetry, at its most radical, enacts a disturbing decentring of the self, refusing a stable distance between 'inner' and 'outer' languages, perceptions, and myths. Plath challenges the "white" world, not through personal insight, and not just through her scathing sarcasm and parody, but by collecting and detailing the operations of discourse, recovering images of
older social rituals (in part, to destabilize the present paradigm). She challenges by seeking out marginalized languages (connected to the body, desire, experience, difference), and by insisting upon the instability of systems of meaning. One thinks, for example, of her threateningly porous bodies and her extremely slippery imagery and pronouns. Her relentless questioning provokes the "white" world, opening up a distance, a dialogue between intrusive idols and the souls they would colonize.

In "Edge", the final poem before her suicide, Plath, in an unusual turn, loses this expressed desire that marks the best of her poems—that is, to engage with the world. Here, the persona completely withdraws into herself, severing any connection with the outside. Even her children are radically withdrawn, curled back and closed into herself like a ball. The poem's relatively broken format, its enjambed lines forcefully separating brief two line stanzas, reinforce the image of severing a connection:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded.
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close . . .

The hopeful image of a rose blooming from a vase that we found in "In Plaster" is replaced, here, by the image of it closing in upon itself and "stiffen[ing]" in death. The impression is horrific, but also the nearest picture of self-wholeness and closure she can produce. In the end, then, wholeness and closure are found outside of the cultural field, and her desire for engagement with the public realm is a fantasy or "illusion", which she has grown tired of pursuing:

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

The only witness is Plath's recurring moon figure who has grown "used to this sort of thing." As in Plath's other poems, the moon represents that element of the self which cannot be assimilated into the dominant world picture. The moon is uncontrollable, always external to the cultural ground, barely in view. Her gravitational pull is invisible, a silent force. And yet, Plath ends with an odd image of the moon producing sound and effort: "Her blacks crackle and drag." Though the woman literally dissolves into oblivion,
the moon as an extension of this self is fantasticaly heard and felt. It is a shining, perfect figure of unity and wholeness, but it is still starkly disconnected from the social world, at a distance, "Staring from her hood of bone."

Whereas Plath in her other poems looks to engage in the world, in "Edge" the persona utterly rejects the outside to travel into herself. And yet, "Edge" is similar to her best poems in its image of a persona that becomes lost, even intentionally lost, in her surroundings. Her children absorb into her, and she dissolves into herself. She lets the self, along with those extensions of herself (her children), recede, and this allows her to escape from the world. But in escaping the world she may be like the moon, and observe the world, and her place, or lack of place, within it, from a removed distance. In the end, almost in spite of herself, she remains an eternally open eye, regarding her world.
Works Consulted


