



# Plath Profiles

*Volume 11*





### *From Modern to Mythos*

This piece was inspired by Sylvia Plath's poem entitled "*The Munich Mannequins*", which was subsequently inspired by Plath's time in Munich, Germany. The poem details how the culture there seemed vapid and dull; fake and ultra-conservative. Plath is famous in this poem for referring to Munich as being as such: "In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome," (Plath, line 12). When I read that - I nearly feel out of my chair in amazement and decided that this would be the impetus for my work.

The mannequins have been superimposed into the piece as well as a famous image of Sylvia Plath herself. I decided to project her image though an old television set, as I find the juxtaposition of these images rather striking and even existential in nature, because Plath herself has been debated as an existentialist. After all, she did seem to be well aware of the absurdities of the world and suffered from depression, which led to a rather bleak philosophical outlook which can now be seen as social commentary. The piece exudes decay with a little darkness added to give the feeling of entropy. The statue of the girl on a horse is meant to reference Plath's "*Ariel*" poem, as a snapshot of two of her works which inspired me in this piece's creation.

- Shawn Gillick



# Editor's Note

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Welcome to the newest iteration of *Plath Profiles*, Volume Eleven. In this issue, our focus shifts from the museum or archive of Plath scholarship to the creative exploration of the Plath legacy, incorporating creative photography, a play excerpt, and an international Hindi translation of an iconic Plath poem. Our new team has worked very hard to provide the most cutting-edge resources for Plath scholarship, expansions on Plath's oeuvre and influence on the creative world, as well as maintaining our focus on critical essays and poetry which we have come to be known for. Through a rigorous process of peer review, collaboration, and editing, we have compiled some of the most hybrid, innovative, and thought-provoking pieces on Plath and her work to date.

Many of this Volume's submissions derive from the pieces left for evaluation from our publication of Volume 10, and we would like to take a moment to thank all of these authors for both their patience and fortitude with editing and revision as we ushered in and navigated the transition of a new *Plath Profiles* editing team. We are proud of our authors, editors, and readers, and all who make up the dedicated Plath scholarly community.

We are always looking for new submissions to continue the scholarly discourse and creative output of our Plath-centric network. If you have any questions, comments, ideas, or would be interested in helping with the process of publication for *Plath Profiles*, please email our organization at [PlathProfiles@gmail.com](mailto:PlathProfiles@gmail.com).

In addition, if you would like to submit work for future consideration, please visit the Indiana University submission page at <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/submission/wizard>.

Thank you again for your patronage, and we look forward to continuing to provide you with the only Plath-based academic journal in the world, *Plath Profiles*.

Yours in Plath,  
Editors Dolores, Eric, and Bill

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## About the Journal

*William K. Buckley, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University Northwest, founded Plath Profiles in 2008 at Oxford University in the U.K. during a Sylvia Plath convention. He announced his intention for such a journal and the response from Plath scholars was immediate. The response to this journal since 2009 has been overwhelming.*

*Plath Profiles prints essays, poetry, art, memoirs, book reviews, responses, student essays, and notes, along with new media and released documents from the Plath estate. Indiana University is also the home of the Lilly Library, which has the largest and most extensive collection of materials on Plath.*



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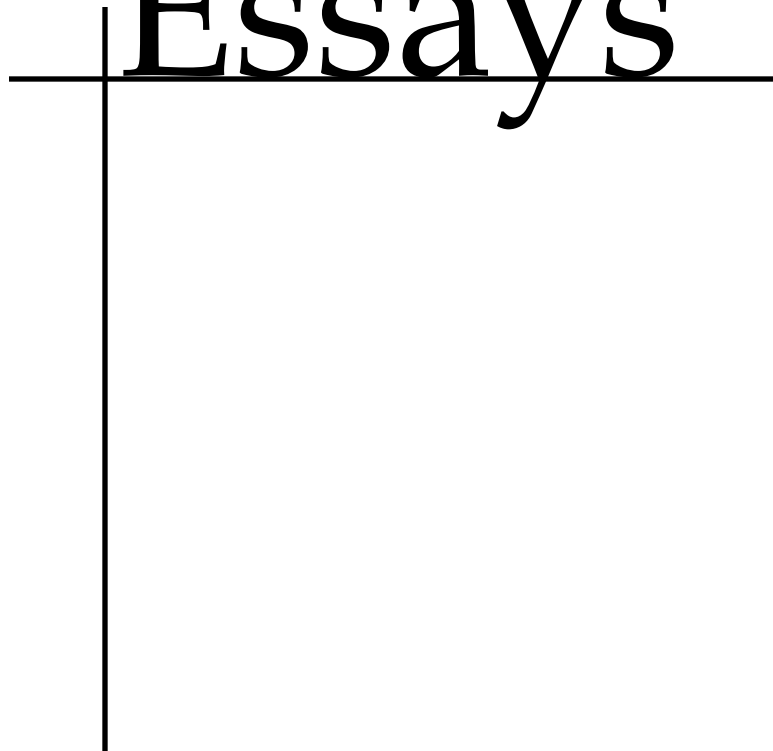
**Shawn Gillick**

"From Modern To Mythos"



*Plath Profiles*

# Essays



# “I Never Will Need Shorthand”

## *Sylvia Plath and Speedwriting*

by Catherine Rankovic

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In an aerogramme from London dated September 23, 1960, 27-year-old poet and short-story writer Sylvia Plath asked her mother, Mrs. Aurelia Plath, to find among Plath's possessions back in Wellesley, Massachusetts, her yellow paperback speedwriting book, and mail it.<sup>1</sup> An American living in London with her husband and infant, Plath was competing for informal temporary clerical jobs and finding them closed to applicants without shorthand or another kind of rapid-writing skill. In Britain, the most basic clerical title was not, as in the United States, “typist” or “secretary,” but “shorthand typist,”<sup>2</sup> spelling out the skills required.

“Shorthand,” also called “stenography,” denotes a written language—using symbols, which was developed for professional note-taking for business purposes. In the U.S., and in the writings of Sylvia Plath, “shorthand” refers almost always to Gregg shorthand—the most efficient of several competing 20th-century shorthand systems. A stenographer typically met with her boss and, using shorthand, captured his dictated words, verbatim, and in handwriting, ideally kept pace with the normal speaking speed of about 120 words per minute. Mastering Gregg shorthand requires six months to two years of study and practice, and this is as true now as it was a century ago when Gregg was new.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 513.

<sup>2</sup> Cryer, P. (n.d.) Shorthand-Typing: A Common Employment for Women in 1950s Britain [Web log post]. Retrieved September 9, 2016 from [www.1900s.org.uk](http://www.1900s.org.uk); and Plath, S., letter to Aurelia Plath, January 27, 1961; *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 571.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Four Shorthand Pitfalls,” *Shorthand and Typewriter News*, vol. 2, no. 2, February 1914, p. 30: “Make up your mind that you cannot expect to become much of a shorthand writer in less than a year of hard work; the chances are that it will be nearer eighteen months before you are ‘worth your salt’.”

Over the 2000 years stenography has been known to exist, it had most of the time been used by males; mainly for courtroom reporting or its equivalent. As such, it was considered an accomplishment and a manly art. Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens, for their own reasons, wrote in shorthand. President Abraham Lincoln's two male secretaries took his dictation in shorthand. Female stenographer-typists entered the full-time U.S. workforce in significant numbers between 1870 and 1880. By 1890, the business-office hierarchy was stratified by gender into those who dictated and those who took dictation and typed it up; already the percentage of stenographer-typists who were female was 64 percent and typewriting and shorthand skills were devalued proportionately.<sup>4</sup> Stenography became aspirational not for males, but for females. In a popular youth novel published in 1904, eight-year-old Nan Bobbsey, a businessman's daughter, declares she is going to become a stenographer when she grows up. Nan's father has a female stenographer.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>[https://www.officemuseum.com/office\\_gender.htm](https://www.officemuseum.com/office_gender.htm), table "US Stenographers and Typists, 1870-1930." Retrieved 19 November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bobbsey Twins: Merry Days Indoors and Out*, p. 8.

Soon after the first mass entry of women into the U.S. business workforce, most office jobs for females were clerical and most clericals female, and that was the case in Plath's time and now.<sup>6</sup> In the mid-20th century, even the most highly educated women expected to start their careers as clericals. Plath wrote in her journal of June-July 1953, "When I apply for jobs after college, or after graduate school, I will want to know typing and shorthand. . . my bargaining power will be much better" (*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 543; ellipsis in original).

Sylvia Plath resisted learning shorthand and in fact never learned it. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath's autobiographical novel set in the year 1953, Plath's protagonist Esther Greenwood, a college English major like Plath, is repelled by her glimpse of Gregg shorthand symbols in one of her mother's teaching textbooks

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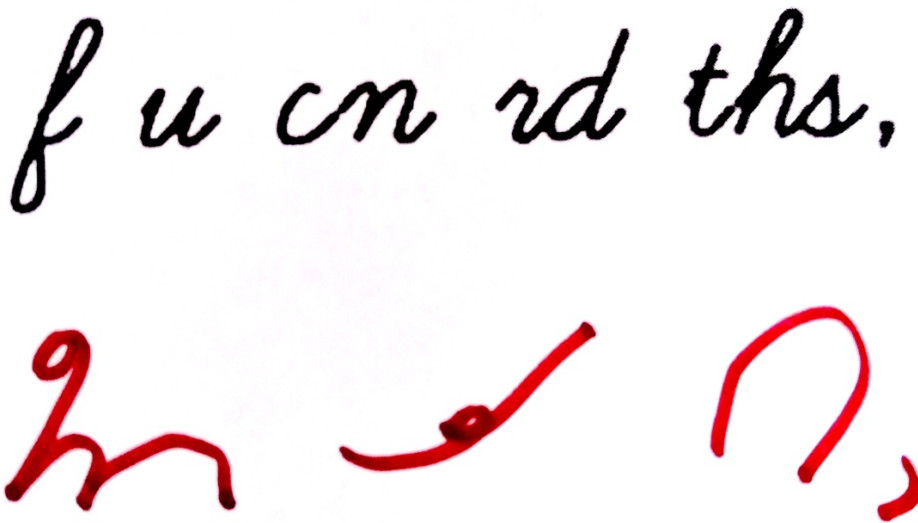
<sup>6</sup> England, Kim and K. Boyer, "Women's Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meaning of Clerical Work." *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 307-340; and Kurtz, Annalyn, "Why Secretary Is Still the Top Job for Females." CNN Business, January 31, 2013. [https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP\\_LN](https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP_LN), retrieved June 18, 2019. Web.



(*The Bell Jar*, 61). They remind her of the “hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas” and abbreviations, such as those in the periodic table, taught in her college physics and chemistry courses. Esther explains, “What I couldn’t stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers” (29). Gregg’s silent language of “scribbled little curlicues” was a ticket for ambitious young women into clerical jobs better paid than those without it, or jobs more compatible with their interests. Esther cannot imagine herself in any job using shorthand (100).

Yet the job market finally forced Sylvia Plath to acquire skill in something resembling shorthand: speedwriting.

Speedwriting is a form of rapid writing using the cursive Roman alphabet. Technically, then, it is longhand rather than shorthand. But speedwriting could be learned in weeks rather than months or years, and in a pinch could pass as “shorthand” on the job. Learning speedwriting wedged open one of the few doors that Plath found closed to her.



f u c n rd ths,

h u c n rd ths,

**Fig. 1. Speedwriting, in black; the identical words in Gregg shorthand in red.**

While living with her husband Ted Hughes in Boston in 1958—both of them beginning to try to write full-time—Plath for the first time wanted a clerical job to “give [her] life a kind of external solidity and balance” it apparently did not have on its own (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2, 266). Unused to an unprecedented amount of unstructured time, she agonized in her journal about feeling unable to write fiction. In her journal on Sunday, September 14, Plath resolved to follow a strict writing schedule starting the next day. It dissolved in panic and creative paralysis. She wrote that she had not lived enough to have something to write about. “I don’t want a job until I am happy with writing—yet feel desperate to get a job—to fill myself up with some external reality” (*Journals*, 420, 422). She wrote to the Smith College vocational office in September 1958, asking for help and giving references, but received no answer until she wrote again in April 1959.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, Plath went to an employment agency that, in October 1958, placed her in a temporary job in Massachusetts General Hospital’s department of

adult psychiatry.<sup>8</sup> The job would prove pivotal to her creative work.

### Why Plath Hated Shorthand

In *The Bell Jar* Plath, through her protagonist, details her reasons for resisting from all quarters pressure to learn shorthand. For aspiring writers Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood, who narrates *The Bell Jar*, “shorthand” carried baggage beyond being gendered, servile, utterly foreign-looking and commended by their mothers—the real and the fictional—who both taught shorthand professionally at a business college. Esther says her mother told her that “Nobody wanted a plain English major” unless she knew shorthand (*Bell Jar*, 61).

Esther internalizes this pressure. By comparison with business-college students who have learned shorthand, Esther, a student at an elite women’s college and a prizewinning writer with professional editorial experience, judges herself as unskilled and unprepared for the job market she must face after graduation, in which bosses, almost always male, literally dictate to female clericals (*Bell Jar*, 62).

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<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath to Alice Norma Davis, letters of September 24, 1958 (*Complete Letters* vol. 2, 277) and April 28, 1959 (*Complete Letters* vol. 2, 315).

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<sup>8</sup> *Journals*, October 14, 1958, 424.

A taker of shorthand must also transcribe the boss's dictation and polish it using exacting language protocols and editorial skills, then format and type the document to perfection. Only perfection would do. Mid-century employers seeking clericals, in want-ad columns labeled "Women," asked for quantifiable skills such as typewriting and shorthand, but tended to gloss skilled language labor as "attention to detail," and allied with other "soft skills" such as congeniality or neatness: traits desirable in a clerical worker yet not worth recognizing or compensating. When the boss accepted and signed the finished document, he was claiming his clerical's language skills as his own.

The prospect of learning shorthand threatens Esther more than most because pressure to accept female-gendered para-literary jobs feels to her like pressure to surrender whatever authorial agency she has and prepare for an amanuensis role. "I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters," she says (*Bell Jar*, 62).

Plath's journal entries from 1953 and Esther's first-person narrative, also taking place in 1953, show both accepting shorthand lessons as a way of salvaging a disappointing summer that both hoped to devote to creative writing. Yet their capitulations are not the same. Plath

mentioned planned summer shorthand lessons in a letter to her mother dated April 24, 1953 (*Letters* vol. 1, 596); her tone is light. Plath spends June in New York City working in her dream job, returning home disillusioned and depressed. That and a disappointment related to her writing has her imagining a future so diminished that learning shorthand that summer is a must, something to cling to (*Journals*, Appendix 5, pp. 543-546).

According to Mrs. Plath, Sylvia after four lessons showed no aptitude for shorthand and was only more deeply depressed when they agreed to give up (*Letters Home*, 124). Mrs. Greenwood talks her depressed daughter into learning shorthand starting that same evening, the same day Esther tried and failed to start writing a novel (*The Bell Jar*, 99).

Esther Greenwood cuts short her one and only shorthand lesson, pleading a headache, and goes to bed but lies awake considering multiple new life plans. That night she imagines strangling her sleeping, snoring mother, whose pincurls gleam "like a row of little bayonets" (*Bell Jar*, 100). Even while sleeping, Mrs. Greenwood is a partisan for the system that would welcome Esther only as a scribe for men.



Sleepless Esther attempts to read *Finnegan's Wake*, the topic she has chosen for her senior thesis, but the letters on the page, as if animated, take on "fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese" (*Bell Jar*, 102) or like the chemical and mathematical symbols Esther has already told the reader she loathes, or like Gregg shorthand. Finding with *Finnegan's Wake* that even the English language eludes her, Esther considers changing her college major and track. Despairing of that, she thinks of taking a break from college and working full-time for a year. Yet as Esther sees it, a female who has not learned shorthand has only two job options: waitress or typist (*Bell Jar*, 103).

Esther's conclusion about the job outlook for women in the summer of 1953 might now seem reductive and outdated, but only because in the 21st century we call a waitress a server and a clerical an administrative assistant. Clerical work in 2018, 65 years later, was in the U.S. the third most common occupation for women and the most gendered of the top ten full-time occupations: 94.1 percent female.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, Most Common Occupations for Women:  
<https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/employment-earnings-occupations.htm - largestshare>, retrieved June 18, 2019;

In July 1958, five years after her mental breakdown, two years into her marriage and less than a month into her writing year, Plath consulted her mother about possible jobs both interesting and lucrative. Mrs. Plath gave her shorthand-resistant daughter information about yet another rapid-writing system: stenotyping, or keyboarded shorthand. It required formal training. Plath considered it but wrote to her mother she did not want to have to take a course to qualify for a job.<sup>10</sup>

Esther Greenwood had been annoyed that Gregg shorthand reduced perfectly fine words into crabbed little "curlicue" symbols. When compelled by the job market to learn some form of rapid writing, learning speedwriting instead of shorthand allowed Plath at least to use the language she had mastered, not a language she hadn't. And her choice spited or at least bypassed her mother because speedwriting

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"Why Secretary is Still Most Common Job for Women,"  
[https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP\\_LN](https://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html?iid=HP_LN) retrieved June 18, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2 (August 1, 1958), 267.

was neither shorthand nor stenotyping, and Plath taught herself from a yellow paperback self-teaching manual.

### What Is Speedwriting?

Speedwriting in its trademarked form was developed by Emma Belle Dearborn (1874-1937), a shorthand instructor whose students complained that learning shorthand was time-consuming and expensive. Dearborn announced what she called "Brief English" in 1923.<sup>11</sup> She renamed the product Speedwriting in 1924 and sold it directly to the public as a correspondence course. Below is a detail of an advertisement for Speedwriting in the November 1924 issue of *Popular Science* magazine. It contrasts Gregg and Pitman (the standard shorthand in the United Kingdom) with Speedwriting.<sup>12</sup> [Figure 2]

<sup>11</sup> "Woman Inventor". (1923, October 22). *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, p. 28. Retrieved September 4, 2017 from [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)

<sup>12</sup> "Can You Read This?" [Advertisement]. (1924 November). *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. 105 No. 5, p. 25. The first 34 pages of this issue are advertisements, including classifieds.

POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY 25

**Can you read this?**

*nsa-f-e-a-z*

(Translation: In this system you must first learn your symbols.)

**Can you read this?**

*Onmoe*

(Translation: Also in this system you must first learn your symbols.)

**Now read this—**

*n spdrig u lr no u smbs.*

(Translation: In Speedwriting you already know your symbols.)

**T**HE last line is *Speedwriting*, a remarkable new discovery that takes the place of shorthand. Now everyone can write shorthand the new easy way. All the business world needs shorthand because shorthand saves time. Time is money. Timesaving means success. Shorthand should be a business tool not only for the commercial stenographer, but the typist, the office worker, the business executive, professional men, the writer, the news reporter. You should be able to put thought on paper with the speed of thought itself. But few in the business world can read national authorities on the leading methods employed in these systems. But these years of classroom teaching in such leading educational institutions as Columbia University, Simmons College, University of California, Rochester Business Institute, etc., convinced Miss Dearborn that ordinary shorthand systems would always remain too difficult for mastery except by the few with a special aptitude or willingness to give a special amount of time to learning them. She decided therefore, to develop a shorthand system without the usual shorthand symbols. From her research and experiments finally came the discovery and per-

Dearborn's was not the first such system, but with similar, persistent advertising that by 1928 had cost her company nearly half a million dollars, Speedwriting became a stunning success. Hundreds of schools in the U.S. and Canada bought franchise rights to teach it under that proprietary name. Endorsements from Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., and Admiral Richard E. Byrd—whose polar-exploration team Dearborn taught in person—helped pitch Speedwriting to males and management for whom shorthand was women's work.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Brett, H. "'First the Public, Then the Schools!' Key to Success of a Remarkable Woman". (1928, October 28). *Business Journal*, p. 16. Retrieved September 3, 2016. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23722800.1928.10771228>

Dearborn's thriving Speedwriting business suffered during the Great Depression and from numerous imitations and piracy. In 1931 a circuit court ruled that Speedwriting had no claim to copyright because it was not a system but merely a way to string letters together.<sup>16</sup> During a setback in the economy, on July 28, 1937, Dearborn jumped from her apartment window. She was among the eight suicides who reportedly

leaped from windows in New York City that day. She was 63.<sup>17</sup>

School of Speedwriting ads, much smaller than those of the 1920s, continued to appear, demoted to the glamorless classified-ad pages in the back pages of magazines. A classified ad in the September 1944 issue of *Popular Mechanics*, page 53A, lists Speedwriting's selling points after 20 years in business:

SHORTHAND in 6 weeks at home. Famous Speedwriting system, no signs or symbols. Easy to learn; easy to write and transcribe. Fast preparation for a job. Surprisingly low cost. 100,000 taught by mail. Used in leading offices and civil service. Write for free booklet. Speedwriting, Dept. 1510, 274 Madison Ave., New York 16.

In the same issue of September 1944, large illustrated ads, picturing males, advertised all types of vocational courses, including stenography, as preparation for postwar employment. Despite Speedwriting's targeted campaigning, stenography was

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<sup>14</sup> "Getting Ready to Write South Pole Story" [Captioned newspaper photograph]. (1928, August 9). *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, p. 2. Retrieved July 27, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Modern Woman a Radical in Business Says Anne Morgan—'No' Says Roosevelt". (1927, March 21). *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, PA). Web. <http://i.imgur.com/m7egntq.jpg>. Retrieved July 27, 2017 from i.imgur.com

<sup>16</sup> *Brief English Systems vs. Owen*, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit - 48 F.2d 555 (2d Cir. 1931) (1931, April 6), <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/48/555/1569115>. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from law.justia.com

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<sup>17</sup> "Eight Killed in Falls from N.Y. Windows". (1937, July 30). *Ottawa Journal*, p. 1. Retrieved August 2, 2017.



women's work. To see that, all anyone had to do was enter a business office. In 1930, 96 percent of all stenographer-typists in the U.S. were female; in 1964, counting the stenographer-typists by that time more commonly called "secretaries," 97 percent.<sup>18,19</sup> Sylvia Plath's era, and the social class her education permitted her to access, framed shorthand as a skill educated women could deploy should more ambitious career plans fail, so for Plath and Esther Greenwood learning shorthand was preparing for defeat. Yet what *The Bell Jar* does not say or see is that for women without college educations, rapid-writing skill offered an alternative to domestic service or other physically taxing employment. Until 1940 the largest category of employment for women in the U.S. was domestic service.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Gender and the office*. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from [http://www.officemuseum.com/office\\_gender.htm](http://www.officemuseum.com/office_gender.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Wirtz, W. Willard, U.S. Department of Labor. *Background Facts on Women Workers in the United States*. (1965, September). p. 8. Retrieved August 2, 2017 from [fraser.stlouisfed.org](http://fraser.stlouisfed.org)

<sup>20</sup> May, Vanessa. "Domestic Workers in U.S. History." Oxford Research Encyclopedias, "American History." Web. Retrieved June 19, 2019.

Shorthand or speedwriting to many women meant not a step down into servility but a step up from what otherwise might be literal servanthood.

School of Speedwriting ads targeting females featured photos of well-groomed young women and the now iconic Speedwriting slogans "bkm a steno & gt a gd jb & hi pa" (later revised to say, "bkm a sec & gt a gd jb") in general-interest and women's magazines and on placards in buses and subway cars. These persisted until the 1970s, when in the U.S. inexpensive portable dictation machines such as the Dictaphone and Dictabelt eroded the market value of rapid-writing credentials. The latest School of Speedwriting ad I could find appeared in the September 1977 issue of *Mademoiselle*. It said, in plain block lettering, "Yes, I went to college. But Speedwriting got me my job."

The Speedwriting slogan's rewording, from "bkm a steno" to "bkm a sec," reflects also the advancement of the job title "secretary" over "stenographer." The single female business-office "steno," not a sidekick or Gal Friday but a professional, was occasionally glamorized in books and movies up through the 1930s; one aspired to become a stenographer as one

might aspire to become a nurse. The title and profession of “stenographer” dissolved into the catch-all title and job of “secretary,” formerly a title for males. *The Bell Jar* tells us that by 1953 stenography was an entry-level skill.

### **Plath’s Choice**

Dearborn’s Speedwriting correspondence course, in six slender volumes, like Gregg shorthand inspired dozens of competitors. These courses fed a demand for vocational rapid-writing training so enormous it is hard to imagine today. Profits came from textbook sales. Speedwriting-type alphabetic systems introduced in the 1950s include Stenoscript (1950),

Quickhand (1953), the School of Speedwriting’s authorized update, Speedwriting Shorthand (1954), Forkner Alphabet Shorthand (1955), and Carter Briefhand (1957).


Because no samples of Plath’s speedwriting have been discovered it isn’t certain which system she chose to learn, but Emma Dearborn’s School of Speedwriting ads reliably appeared for Plath’s entire lifespan in the women’s magazines Plath read, wrote for, and always aimed to write more for—including the issue of *Mademoiselle* Plath guest-edited, August 1953—and Plath and her mother both capitalized “Speedwriting” when writing the word, Mrs. Plath the most consistently. [Figure 3]

Mademoiselle for August 1953

...quite clear that if I didn't take this  
...could starve for all she cared.  
...first night as a waitress in X House  
...ghastly for them too. Being hu-  
...they all looked up when I entered the  
...Then, recognizing me, they all  
...room. Then, I died a thousand deaths  
...down again. I died a thousand deaths  
...soup and dessert.  
...you can get used to anything. The  
...a terrible sort of deference.  
...showed me a by-line in the *Daily* the  
...time I got a dinner and announced it.  
...they rose at dinner and announced it.  
...the girls would all sing "Hail to Sarah!"  
...I blushed and felt miserable. They were  
...singing something.

...the summer between freshman and sopho-  
...years I got a job on our home-town pa-  
...got a lot of experience, earned almost  
...hundred dollars and fell in love with a  
...He treated me like an adult. We  
...about the world and not about college,  
...the only time the word sorority was ever  
...mentioned he snickered and said: "Do they  
...go in for that nonsense?" It was the first  
...I ever had that an attractive man could  
...different to sororities. At the end of the  
...er he asked me to marry him. I said yes,  
...back to school and my house job.  
...nestly, if I ever thought Rush Week was  
...ating from the outside, it really seemed  
...m the inside. First of all the members  
...a lot younger than they had before.  
...been used to them only at dinner—all  
...up and on their best behavior. But  
...louching around in sloppy blue jeans,  
...ere almost too immature to be true.  
...of the old X girls came back too to  
...ith the rushing. When I say old I  
...omen in their forties, fifties and even  
...I thought this was a touching sign of  
...until it became clear that these alum-  
...e just promoting daughters and nieces  
...ers who were being rushed that year.

**LEARN SHORTHAND  
IN 6 WEEKS  
As I Did!**



Miss Dulcie Kaufman  
25 Central Park West  
New York 23, New York

"Six weeks after enrolling for Speedwriting, I could take dictation at the rate of 120 words per minute and transcribe it accurately. Through Speedwriting's Placement Service, I was interviewed and hired for a secretarial position at a salary that exceeded any I had earned previously. I unhesitatingly recommend Speedwriting to anyone desirous of acquiring good stenographic skills."

u k re 120  
wpm + ul gt  
mo pa if u ln

**Speedwriting**  
FAMOUS ABC SHORTHAND®  
120 WORDS PER MINUTE

**NO SYMBOLS —  
NO MACHINES —  
Uses ABC's**

**IN 6 WEEKS**

TYPING AVAILABLE

[School of Speedwriting ad from *Mademoiselle*, August 1953, p. 375 (detail), with an exaggerated claim about Speedwriting speed. Cursive lettering's backstrokes and ligatures forced Speedwriting's high end down toward about 80 words per minute. Gregg shorthand dispensed with such obstacles.]

Some employers weeded out humbler applicants by making shorthand, a lengthy and expensive course of study, a job requirement whether the position demanded it or not. That was my own experience. Rapid-writing skill also confirmed the candidate's lack of resistance to preparing for and accepting highly skilled, responsible, and gendered work with a gendered salary and little to no chance of advancement

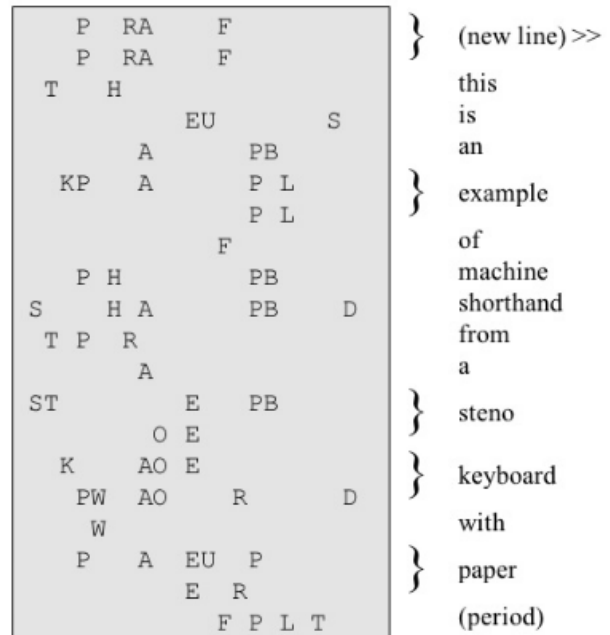
into jobs gendered male. Rapid-writing systems proliferated as they did because, like Esther Greenwood, females seeking employment either learned a form of rapid writing or faced futures as waitresses or typists, who forewent the extra dollars shorthand skill could bring. When former Fulbright scholar, Smith College and Cambridge graduate and former *Mademoiselle* guest editor Plath sought office work in



Boston and later in London, even those qualifications did not allow her to defy job-market norms. Plath briefly considered learning stenotyping. Plath's August 1, 1958 journal entry shows Plath urging herself to work on both writing women's short fiction and "even stenotyping." Any zest for stenotyping was fleeting. On December 12, 1958, Sylvia fumed in her journal that for her birthday [October 27] her mother had offered her \$300—in 2017 dollars, \$2,500—to take a stenotyping course. By this, Plath wrote, her mother had insultingly implied that because Ted Hughes seemed uninterested in regular gainful employment, Plath would have to be the family breadwinner (*Journals*, 434). Mrs. Plath was acting on a longstanding concern. In a marginal note written in Gregg shorthand on Plath's letters—Mrs. Plath made many such notes—Mrs. Plath left proof of her worry about the Hughes's financial future even before the couple had married. On a letter from Sylvia dated May 16, 1956, in reference to Sylvia's typewritten words "Our children will have such fun," Mrs. Plath wrote in Gregg, "if they don't starve first."<sup>21</sup> (The couple married on June 16, 1956.)

<sup>21</sup> Rankovic, Catherine, "Aurelia Plath Shorthand Transcription Table from Correspondence in the Lilly Library Plath Archive Plath mss. II", ID #76,

Court reporters master highly specialized stenotype keyboarding able to record up to 225 words per minute, and can decipher its cryptic output [Figure 4]



The Hugheses were living in London with their six-month-old daughter when Sylvia on November 19, 1960 wrote a second time to her mother that by brushing up her speedwriting she could qualify for "amusing" odd jobs (*Letters*, vol. 2, 542). Plath nagged her mother for the speedwriting book in further letters dated December 17 and December 24, 1960, suggesting finally, "Couldn't you invent some pretext to get the book from the school as a teacher? I never will need shorthand as this will would

epublications.marquette.edu/AureliaPlath, accessed June 19, 2019. Web.

cover all my needs. I'm dying to get hold of it."<sup>22</sup>

Mrs. Plath hadn't been lax about finding and sending the book. She habitually responded to her daughter's requests without delay. The book Plath wanted wasn't among the items Plath had left in Wellesley because it wasn't her book. In *Letters Home*, page 348, in a note appended to Plath's letter to her of August 1, 1958, Mrs. Plath wrote that Plath in 1958 taught herself speedwriting from books lent by "a mutual friend," identified in Mrs. Plath's original manuscript of *Letters Home* as author Mary Stetson Clarke, and this is confirmed by letters of thanks Sylvia Plath and Mrs. Plath sent to Clarke in spring 1959. Both letters say Ted Hughes provided Plath with dictation for practice.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Letters of December 24, 1960, *The Complete Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 556.

<sup>23</sup> Plath mss. II, Box 9, folder 8, p. 45, Sylvia Plath Archive, Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington; Aurelia Plath to Mary Stetson Clarke, letter, March 15, 1959; *The Complete Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Vol. 2, letter, Sylvia Plath to Mary Stetson Clarke, April 10, 1959, p. 309-310. Footnote 2 on p. 309 of *Complete Letters* says Clarke bought for Plath "a book on learning shorthand," but Plath herself in the April 10 letter calls it a speedwriting book,

## The "Johnny Panic" Breakthrough

Plath was elated by her new temporary secretarial job in the Adult Psychiatric Clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital. She interviewed incoming patients, transcribed doctors' case notes and letters, and kept patients' records. In her October 14, 1958 journal entry she wrote that her job:

gives my day, & Ted's an objective structure . . . the job is good for me . . . my objective daily view of troubled patients through the records objectifies my own view of myself. I shall try to enter into this schedule a wedge of writing—to expand it. I feel my whole sense & understanding of people being deepened & enriched by this: as if I had my wish & opened up the souls of the people in Boston and read them deep (*Journals*, 424). In other words, the job was a win-win.

By December 16, 1958 Plath had finished the first of two short stories inspired by her hospital job

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and Aurelia Plath says in *Letters Home* (348) that the "books" were lent. Linda Wagner-Martin states in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987; p. 157) that Plath in 1958 "relearned" speedwriting, but there is no evidence that Plath learned it before 1959.

(*Journals*, 441). The narrator, never named, of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" is a clerical worker who transcribes, types, copies and compiles psychiatric patients' accounts of their fearsome dreams, both as part of her job and secretly. She does this in the service of an invisible authority, Johnny Panic, god of fear. Plath actually did keep her own private notes about patients' ills and dreams. As she had wished, she discovered in her job raw material for her writing (*Journals*, Appendix 14, "Hospital Notes," 624-629). The story's narrator interviews new patients and takes dictation from recordings made and played back on an audiograph (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 160), an office machine probably trademarked Audograph, then the most common make. Plath refers again to an audiograph in a 1959 story about hospital clerical workers, "The Daughters of Blossom Street" (*Johnny Panic*, 129).

The boss using an audiograph can voice-record at any hour dictation onto a vinyl disk the typist can play and replay. Boss and typist need never meet, and encoding communications in handwriting and then transcribing them is not necessary. Plath wrote her mother about having used speedwriting while employed at Harvard University (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2,

542), but never wrote in fact or fiction about using speedwriting at the hospital, although Mrs. Plath claims Sylvia used it there (*Letters Home*, 348). The audiograph was one of a growing family of office machines soon to drive rapid writing out of the workplace.

Recording technologies for office work were not new. In her introduction to *Letters Home*, Mrs. Plath wrote that during the summer between her high school graduation and college, the summer of 1924, she had her first full-time job: transcribing dictation from recordings made on wax cylinders. She swore then that no child of hers would have to do such dull and grueling work (*Letters Home*, 5).

In the story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" Plath's first-person narrator spiritualizes her clerical job. By imagining herself the scribe of a god, not a man, her nine-to-five job in a psychiatric clinic is not mundane or servile but an indispensable source of valued material she smuggles home, where she is editing a bible of horrifying dreams.

In a routinized and clinical work environment dedicated to easing suffering, the narrator alone appreciates patients' agonizing dreams and fears as Johnny Panic's artworks, copying them into

notebooks or memorizing recorded dictation for later transcription into her bible (*Johnny Panic*, 160). It seems she began her secret copywork along with her job, because she fears being caught and "losing my job and all my source material" (164). For patients who present no dream, the narrator unearths one, relishing the chance. Her own "dream of dreams" is of viewing, from above, a reservoir filling with all humanity's bad dreams, a turgid cesspool of dragons, snakes and floating body parts, a "sewage farm of the ages" (158). Working all day with distressed people and systematically keeping records, meanwhile she dreams of a smoking, chaotic landscape inhabited only by monsters. The narrator credits her god Johnny Panic with injecting "a poetic element into this business you don't often find elsewhere. And for that he has my eternal gratitude" (161).

Christian imagery—a device later to function exquisitely as fretwork in Plath's poetry—begins to swamp the story when the male Clinic Director discovers Plath's narrator reading and transcribing old case studies after hours. Firmly taking her arm, the Clinic Director escorts the narrator to a fourth-floor hall "empty as a church on Monday" (167) and to its Observation Ward and its

monstrous secretary, Miss Millravage. Also present are Johnny Panic's priests, in straitjackets; the narrator, clutching her notebook and hoping they recognize her, raises it and says to them, "Peace. I bring to you. . ." "None of that old stuff, sweetie," says Miss Millravage (*Johnny Panic*, 170).

Crooning "My baby," Miss Millravage embraces the narrator, who fights. Once subdued, the narrator is stripped and robed in sheets for electroshock therapy intended to punish and cure her devotion to Johnny Panic. Miss Millravage fits the narrator's head with "a crown of wire" and on the narrator's tongue lays "the wafer of forgetfulness." Electroshock therapy is presented as a Christ-like torture, and in its throes the narrator has an epiphany, seeing Johnny Panic in all his glory. He has not abandoned her.

This story of a clerical worker reaches farther than any other into Plath's imagination, fantasies and memory. She did not write another like it. Looking back, Plath fans might excitedly call "Johnny Panic" a preview of *The Bell Jar*, yet in the context of 1958 "Johnny Panic" was a story about a creative nonconformist sacrificed to a conformist environment by enforcers of the status quo. Although nimbly

told, the story's theme was a trope of that era, the beatnik era. Its two-dimensional rendering—like a fable it has no subplot, and the narrator has no past, no friends or family, and never mentions money—and tone-deaf religious references did not appeal to any of the publishers Plath sent it to. The story was not published in her lifetime. Plath in October 1960 disparaged "Johnny Panic" as "a sort of mental hospital monologue ending up with the religious communion of shock treatment" (*Letters* vol. 2, 530).

Plath until "Johnny Panic" labored to write fiction about adolescents or young couples. Her journals of summer 1958 show her struggling to take a step forward. "Johnny Panic" is Plath's step forward, tied by subject and date of composition to the secretarial job begun in October. Plath wrote on December 16, 1958 that the story was complete and polished. She did not have high hopes for it, calling it "queer and quite slangy," (*Journals*, 441), a voice she does not yet recognize as her own—not at all. In February 1959 Plath wrote in her journal that she will have made a step forward when she writes a story for *Ladies' Home Journal* (471).

The story's narrator, however, is a new figure in Plath's fiction: an adult wage-earning female, age 33, older

than Plath, nourished by her employment and retaining her personal agency even while taking dictation. She keeps an uncompromising sense of mission in an anti-creative environment. Plath's fictional clericals, including the secretary in the 1962 verse play *Three Women*, are not unhappy workers yet recognize their workplaces as fundamentally inhumane, and transgress by saying so.

From February through April 1959 Plath worked at a second part-time job, in which she did use speedwriting. On May 2 she wrote in one day *The Bed Book*, a children's book (*Journals*, May 3, 1959, 480). On May 31 she wrote in her journal, "I have written six stories this year, and the three best of them in the last two weeks!" (*Journals*, 486). The three includes "This Earth Our Hospital," later published under her new title, "The Daughters of Blossom Street." It is again a first-person hospital story, but realistic and without flair. A group of hospital secretaries responsible for the paperwork about the hospital's dying and dead cannot bring themselves to acknowledge morbidity when facing it—which even their lowly office boy can do. The story's narrator is one of the secretaries, and no different. In November when she sold the story

Plath wrote *The London Magazine's* editor giving her new choice of title saying it better described "the Secretaries being almost ritual, attendant figures in the euphemistic ceremonies softening the bare fact of death."<sup>24</sup>

The Second Voice of *Three Women*, a dramatic poem about pregnancy and birth written in 1962, is a pregnant secretary who criticizes her male co-workers in the office as "cardboard" and "flat":

That flat, flat flatness from which  
ideas, destructions,  
Bulldozers, guillotines, white  
chambers of shrieks proceed,  
Endlessly proceed – and the cold  
angels, the abstractions. (*Collected Poems*, p. 177)

To herself, Plath called "The Daughters of Blossom Street" her best story, "full of humor, highly colored characters, good, rhythmic conversation. An amazing advance from 'Johnny Panic'" (*Journals*, May 31, 1958, 487). This is an overestimation. By October 6 her journal entry lumps it with other stories she has written that prove "duller than tears." "Johnny Panic,"

however, bears her re-reading (*Journals*, 515).

## Getting There

In her January 10, 1961 letter (*Complete Letters*, vol. 2, p. 567), Plath thanked Mrs. Plath for sending a Speedwriting book, and on January 27 wrote her mother about enjoying her temporary job doing copyediting and layout for the special spring issue of *The Bookseller*, London's "organ of the book trade" (p. 571). In 1976 its editor remembered Plath's initial visit to the office:

What I recalled particularly was the real indignation with which she insisted that she was offering no literary qualifications but formidable typing and shorthand skills.<sup>25</sup>

Plath seemed confident that her refreshed speedwriting skill could pass for shorthand. Whether she used speedwriting on that job is not known. On February 2, 1961, Plath thanked her mother for the yellow speedwriting book, and then on February 9 for "all the speedwriting

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<sup>24</sup> Letter to John Lehman, November 12, 1959, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 2, p. 368.

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<sup>25</sup> *The Bookseller*, March 27, 1976, p. 1761. News clipping held by Smith College.



books," and does not mention speedwriting again.<sup>26</sup>

Plath had a miscarriage on February 6, 1961, and would have an appendectomy on February 28. She wrote the poem "Tulips," which Ted Hughes called a breakthrough poem and herald of her "Ariel voice," on March 18. In April she began drafting *The Bell Jar*, which opens by describing her office co-workers.<sup>27</sup>

Plath's office jobs fed her confidence and the confidence fed her fiction. It can be argued that after hospitalizations for her own ills Plath wrote poems inspired by those stays, from a patient's point of view, simply writing what she lived soon after she lived it. But her medical poems are not critiques of the medical world. They are contemplative.

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<sup>26</sup> The upper- and then lower-case "s" in "speedwriting" are Plath's own. See also *Letters Home*, p. 400. Mrs. Plath in her editing of Plath's letters created consistency by capitalizing all instances of the word "Speedwriting," suggesting that Plath learned the version trademarked by Emma Dearborn.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Sylvia Plath to Ann Davidow-Goodman and Leo Goodman, April 27, 1961, *Letters* vol. 2, 614).

Psychiatrist Roger Gould wrote that "One of the appeals of a business career is that the business world has banned human frailty." It sanitized the workplace biologically and also, for the successful, expunged from their record any human flaws.<sup>28</sup> If that is true, Plath's office stories and references to office life and practice are critiques from the unexpected point of view of one whose minor role in the business world was destined and enforced, who could therefore afford to explore human frailty in such settings, and in common language anyone could read.

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<sup>28</sup> Gould, Robert, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, p. 230.

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# Foucault and Plath, Body and Soul

by Míša Stekl

*"[T]he soul is the prison of the body."*

- Michel Foucault

*"Living with her was like living with my own coffin.  
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully."*

- Sylvia Plath

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Michel Foucault and Sylvia Plath: a queer pairing, if ever there was one. I say "queer," not only because the former thinker has been foundational to queer theory, but because the strange encounter of these two — Plath, a confessional poet; and Foucault, a poststructuralist critic of confessional power — would seem to confound traditional literary-philosophical categories and, ultimately, truths. In attempting to stage such an encounter, I do not seek a dialectical synthesis which would finally reconcile Plath's affirmation of the confessional with Foucault's negation of it; rather, I want to put Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in conversation with Plath's "In Plaster," so as to bring out each text's vision of power and its hold on the body and soul. I argue that a Foucauldian analysis of "In Plaster" reveals the poem as irreducible to the confessional liberation of a "true self" hidden underneath social constructions — on the one hand, the speaker's self-contradictions and shifts in consciousness show any "true

self" up as already unstable and inextricable from power relations; on the other, I read "In Plaster" less as a confessional narrative about interiority, and more as a struggle of the body against the "soul" which power constructs in order to capture it. "In Plaster," then, at once reaffirms embodiment, contra the classical elevation of soul over body, and reimagines both "soul" (as one's real yet socially constructed identity) and "body" (as an active and resistant force, no longer resembling the merely passive, Cartesian body-machine). The stakes of this reading involve working out, or at least working *through*, some of the most difficult challenges for Foucault and Plath alike: the much-maligned vagueness of Foucauldian theories of resistance may benefit from Plath's lyrical depiction of the body's forceful, and I argue incessant, conflict with the soul that would contain it; while the confessional interiority traditionally attributed to Plath's poem may be critically reconsidered through

Foucault's poststructuralist account of identity.

Interestingly, both Plath and Foucault envision something like a "double body" (Foucault 28): "I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now" (Plath 1). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault first invokes the "double body" to describe the way in which a king's corporeal body, the individual and "transitory element that is born and dies," is necessarily accompanied by "another [element] that remains unchanged by time and is maintained as the *physical yet intangible* support of the kingdom" (Foucault 28; my emphasis). We can call this other element "the soul," provided that we understand this soul no longer simply as it is "represented by Christian theology" (29), but as a kind of social identity — a *personnage*, in Foucauldian parlance — produced by historically contingent relations of power. This soul is at once "intangible," insofar as it is non-corporeal — irreducible in origin to any individual's body — and yet "physical," insofar as it is the means by which power acts upon material bodies. And so a king's soul is that archetype of political power which outlasts and exceeds any given king, yet which congeals into individual kings by legitimating their sovereign authority. To be sure, this soul is a sociopolitical construction — but it does not follow that it is illusory or "fake"; to understand its historical, material *reality*, we need only consider the political

subjects beheaded under the king's authority, or the wars initiated in his name. "It would be wrong," then, "to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power." (29)

Yet the king's is not the only body that is doubled by such a "soul"; for Foucault, each political subject becomes such — is *subjectivated* — by assuming a soul of their own. Indeed, "at the opposite pole [from the king] one might imagine placing the body of the condemned man," that is the body of a subject condemned, executed, or otherwise punished, by the king; "he, too, has his legal status ... not in order to ground the 'surplus power' possessed by the person of the sovereign, but in order to code the 'lack of power' with which those subjected to punishment are marked." (29) Such that the "surplus power" invested in the king's soul, when "exercised on the subjected body of the condemned man," gives "rise to another type of duplication" — another double, another soul. Whereas the king's soul secures his sovereign power, his subjects, especially those he condemns, are in turn *disempowered* through their own soul-body duplication. So too with the "soul" of the prisoner, the principal subject of Foucault's "genealogy of the modern 'soul'" in *Discipline and Punish*; "the historical reality of this soul ... is

born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint" (29). This "soul" — imposed upon the prisoner's body, from without, by such material technologies of power — will continually discipline, mold, and so *produce* the prisoner's actions, thoughts, and "subjectivity." "The soul," Foucault concludes most ominously, "is the prison of the body." (30) More generally, then, to assume a soul, to become a *subject*, is to be *subjected* to power, to take on a certain socially produced identity which will be constantly policed by power relations. And not only if the subject in question is a prisoner; Foucault finds that the modern prison's panoptic techniques are but the extreme forms of apparatuses of surveillance and capture which extend throughout modern "disciplinary society." As Foucault famously asks, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228) *All of us*, then, are doubled by the "souls" which these various "disciplines" continually (re)inculcate within our bodies, as we constantly learn and work to *discipline* our *selves*, our identities, in accordance with their social norms. To say it again, this discipline or "technology of the 'soul'" (30) has material effects: how we speak and act, eat and diet, exercise and dress, or even "walk [and] sit" (Plath 45) is never unrelated to the social norms we live through our bodies. Yet the body-soul relationship is neither deterministic nor determined

once and for all; because Foucault's "soul" is strictly immanent with the body, their relation runs both ways — even as our souls mold our bodies from outside in, those bodies may mold their souls in turn, in *resisting* those social norms gathered within. Not that the body can transcend its soul, any more than resistance can cleanly escape these relations of power that produce it, but that the body (with all its intertwined normative *and* subversive forces) ceaselessly (re)shapes the soul which shapes it. Soul shapes body shapes soul shapes body shapes soul...

We can already see how Foucault might problematize a traditional — which is to say confessional — reading of Plath. After Foucault, there is no individual subject, no "true self," standing outside of power relations; the individual, as well as their subjectivity and self-identity, are always imbricated in, produced by, power. Thus Foucault's critique of confessional power, in *History of Sexuality*, equally becomes a critique of confessional poetry, à la Plath: to confess one's innermost "truth" is, first of all, to accede to power's demand to hear, to know, to discipline one's every thought and desire. For confession is a cornerstone of the modern "technology of the 'soul'"; we have become a confessing society, Foucault claims, one whose judges, psychiatrists, and teachers — no less than our preachers — demand confession, observation, surveillance. If confessional poetry, moreover, purports

to liberate the poet's "true self," that innermost core of subjectivity supposed to be most repressed by society, then it (confessional poetry) effectively conceals the ways in which even the deepest "truth" of the "self" — the *soul* — is imbricated with relations of power. Confessional poetry would therefore exemplify the ruse that *History of Sexuality* diagnoses as the "repressive hypothesis," in presuming that relations of power simply *repress* some authentic self(-identity) — some soul — such that resistance would effectively consist in freeing, speaking, *confessing* this "true self" so as to shake off those ("fake"?) relations of power which had hidden its truth hitherto. (Cf. *History of Sexuality*, 4-5) But if (confessional!) technologies of power are not limited to repression, if power ceaselessly (re)produces this very truth, this self, this soul, then the question of resistance becomes more complex; how can *I* resist a power that produces *me*?

Certainly not by writing a poem that would speak the truth of my soul (a truth, again, that power never ceases to produce and to surveil). If Plath, for instance, were to write about her struggle to free her "true self" from the ways that people see her, such a poem would necessarily produce, or at least reproduce (police!), the particular identity she has taken on through modern technologies of the soul, while neglecting its/her own social production. Unfortunately, most readings of Plath tend to follow this

(confessional) model, in assuming that, for better or for worse, she seeks to give voice to some repressed inner self. I am not interested in absolutely refuting this charge with respect to Plath's *œuvre* — indeed, it seems rather unavoidable with respect to poems like "Daddy" or "Lady Lazarus" — so much as in complicating its applicability to "In Plaster," by showing how Plath here exceeds such a simple, confessional self-"liberation" and opens onto a provoking meditation on body and soul as well as power and self.

To be sure, the double body that appears in the poem's opening line has often been read as "the false self that prevents the presence of the true Self" (Schwartz). But, with Foucault, we might ask Schwartz where this true Self is supposed to come from. How can we access, from within power relations, a self *outside* all power? Still worse, to a Foucauldian feminist's ears, some critics have equated this "true Self" (in "In Plaster") with "true femininity," such that the plaster in Plath's poem becomes "the masculine veil," the mere "surface of femininity" that *represses* women's "true female sensibilities" (Metcalf). Again, where does such a "true female sensibility" hail from, if not from the very same (social? "fake?") "surface of femininity"? Is there, *truly*, some hidden "True" female self (or soul), some transcendental essence of femininity, which could be neatly extricated from gendered social norms? Or should we rather suspect, especially



following Judith Butler's influential use of Foucault to destabilize the gender/sex distinction, that norms of gender and power filter, *produce*, our access to even the "Truest" sensibility of Woman? For Foucault and his feminist and queer legacy, such is the case: gender and sexuality are neither transcendental nor universal substances, but rather contingent assemblages of power-knowledge that *produce* individuals' souls and, consequently, bodies.

Reading "In Plaster" *with* — rather than (only) *against* — Foucault, though, we might further ask whether the poem can in fact be reduced to a confession of "the true Self" or else of "true female sensibilities." Is the conflict between the poem's first-person speaker and her double, between "I" and "she," simply a reflection of the opposition between true Self and repressive society? Or is it rather a struggle between body and soul, a struggle from which neither can be neatly isolated, since each co-produces the other?

Our most explicit clue that Plath's is a conflict with the soul comes in the third stanza: "Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful. / I gave her a soul" (Plath 15-16; my emphasis). It is worth reflecting on the body-soul relationship at work in these lines: if "without me, she wouldn't exist," then the soul ("she") is in some way dependent on "me" — especially as it is "I" who "gave her a soul," thereby

prioritizing the speaker's embodiment. It is as though the soul were lifeless until being animated, lived out, by a body (just as, in Foucault, the soul is no transcendent essence above or beyond the body). This line also implies, contra the Cartesian tradition, that the "I" — the speaker's subjectivity — is identified with her body rather than with a disembodied soul. The identification of the speaker with her body continues throughout the poem; in the final stanza, Plath writes: "She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy" (53). "Ugly and hairy," here, not only serve to disparage the speaker as aesthetically inferior (in her own eyes) to her saintly double; moreover, these are lowly, *bodily* traits, juxtaposed with the double's saintliness. Plath repeats the association of her speaker's double with a saint twice for emphasis ("She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints" [5]), thereby connoting a spiritual immateriality or transcendence of material needs — both traits classically associated with the disembodied, immaterial soul. Furthermore, "she thought she was immortal" (35), recalling the Western tradition of the soul's immortality that dates back at least to Plato. It seems, then, that "I" am a mere mortal body; "she" is a saintly, immortal soul. Hence, it is certainly possible to read "In Plaster" as a classical conflict between mortal body and immortal soul, taking these terms in their classical, (onto)theological connotations more so than in the social, Foucauldian direction I have begun to

sketch. This classical sense of “soul” is doubtless at play, though I will insist, with Foucault, that it is not the soul’s *sole* sense here.

Whether the speaker’s soul-double is this or that, its relation with the body is clearly one of bitter conflict. Their clash already begins in the first stanza: “At the beginning I hated her” (5); “I blamed her for everything” (10). This body-soul tension can be observed to play out in four stages, dividing the eight-stanza poem into two stanzas per stage. In the first two stanzas, the soul is introduced, and the body hates it; in the third and fourth, the body becomes more accepting of the soul, as soul cares for body; in the fifth and sixth, the conflict intensifies anew, and the soul attempts to leave the body; and finally, the body resolves to fight off her soul. The plot-like structure of “In Plaster” stages something of a battle between the body and the soul, wherein readers are clearly encouraged to side with the body.

This encouragement becomes increasingly evident as the poem continues, and dovetails neatly with materialist critiques of the Christian/Cartesian severing of soul, or mind, from body (if, again, we agree to read these terms through their ontotheological implications for the moment). When, in the fifth stanza, the soul presumes to transcend its body, it ceases to care for her in any beneficial 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” (32-34). The soul attempts to transcend the body to which it is tied, but succeeds only in neglecting that body, allowing its degeneration (enter the speaker’s flaking skin). Moreover, Plath will suggest that there is no soul without the body: in her final line, she threatens that if she dies, the soul will “perish with emptiness ... and begin to miss me” (56). Thus, the Cartesian hierarchy which would separate a “superior,” disembodied mind or soul from an “inferior” body neglects the inextricability of either from the other — and finally accomplishes only the deterioration of both.

However, the Christian/Cartesian sense of soul is not sufficient, on its own, to illuminate the soul of “In Plaster.” How to explain, for instance, “her” (the soul’s) apparent physicality — “She lay in bed with me like a dead body / And I was scared because she was shaped just the way I was” (6)? This is where Foucault’s analysis may begin to illuminate another meaning of “In Plaster,” and show how Plath goes beyond critiquing the soul’s disembodiment in ontotheological tradition. Recall Foucault’s “physical yet intangible” soul: like Plath’s poem, Foucault’s genealogy traces the doubling of a subject’s body by their soul, where that soul is at once materially experienced and socially

constructed. In this light, we could read Plath's attributions of physical traits to her soul-character as allusions to the ways in which power relations materialize, such that the soul's discourses shape one's body, by determining one's actions, communication, dress, etc. And if the soul is always a socially constructed identity, then the fiction of a disembodied and immortal soul is but one historically specific construction. In contemporary ("bio")power, that fiction persists in some ways, but it is no longer the exclusive or main way in which power works on its subjects; the "soul" is no longer just an immaterial substance that outlives the body, but it is also an increasingly precise production and policing of each subject's identity. The "soul," in Foucault as in Plath, may thus recall classical traditions of spiritual immortality *and* denote contemporary social identity, in the same breath.

To return to the real and material effects of the soul-fiction, Plath likens her speaker to a rose, contained by her soul like a vase: "I bloomed out of her as a rose / Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain" (16-17). On the one hand, as we have seen, the soul needs the body to animate it; in this sense, the body gives life to the soul. On the other, the body "*blooms*" out of its porcelain-like soul, suggesting that the body in some way grows out of, is cultivated and shaped by, its soul. Here, too, the relationship between body and

soul is two-way. And Plath repeats the verb "bloom," twice, for emphasis; it aligns neatly with, and draws our attention to, her comparison of herself (or, more exactly, her body) to a "rose." Notably, this is the first time in the poem that Plath seems to value her speaker's body more highly than her soul-double: in likening herself to a blooming flower, she suggests that she is beautiful, in contrast to the "*not very valuable* porcelain" of her soul (though these positions are often contradicted — the soul's own "beauty" [19] is highlighted soon after, and as I have already noted, the body is later described as "ugly and hairy"; I read these contradictions as evidence of the speaker's socially internalized body-shaming, which she simultaneously tries to resist). And just as a porcelain vase might contain a blooming flower — not only by helping to determine, through its own dimensions, the plant's size and shape, but by containing it in a white, "unbreakable" material — the soul constrains the body's development. This returns us to the soul's physical intangibility, in Foucault: the soul is like a durable, (socially) reinforced container for the body which at once reveals, distorts, and conditions the latter's development; yet, the soul's cavity would be empty — in Plath's words, it might "perish with emptiness" (56) — absent a body to fill it, and, through its own material growth, to somehow enhance and even change it.

We begin to see the social dimensions of the soul in the next stanza, when Plath describes how her soul cares for her (body): “she woke me early” (23); “She humored my weakness like the best of nurses, / Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly” (26-7). When the soul wakes the speaker, it acts as an instrument of social discipline which effects a material change in the speaker, determining when she will rise, so that she is awake early enough (to perform, perhaps, the duties corresponding to her social position). Furthermore, Plath’s comparison of her soul to a nurse who mends her bones suggests, firstly, that her bones are broken, and that her soul undertakes material changes — “holding [them] in place” — to somehow “fix” them, to return her body to its “proper” unity. The body, once again, is molded by the soul. For this reason alone, we may conclude that the speaker of “In Plaster” lacks any stable or “true self,” since her “I” (that is, the body, *not* identical with any “true self”) changes constantly in reaction to “her” (the soul, not any “false self”).

The nurse analogy also works to feminize the soul, and not only because of the historical trope of the female nurse (which, I note in passing, is as inaccurate as it is offensive). Furthermore, this soul-nurse is commended for “[h]er tidiness and her calmness and her patience” (25) — all stereotypically feminine traits. Elsewhere, “*she*” is described as “much

whiter [than ‘me’] and unbreakable and with no complaints” (8), “cold” (9), and “a true pacifist” (12) with “no personality” (5). All these descriptions share stereotypical associations with femininity: they paint a picture of a woman who accepts her degradation passively and without complaints, both when she is insulted and when she is tasked with her housewife duties (e.g. *tidying the house*). Plath emphasizes, too, her whiteness: “white” is repeated five times in the poem. The repeated “white” could be read as a marker of her race, though it seems more likely that “whiteness” here stands in for an ideal of purity, especially since “whiteness and beauty” are associated in line 19, and since “the white person [her soul-double] is certainly the superior one” (3). This white purity is also implicitly gendered, as it is connected to a feminine beauty absolutely free — pure — of any blemishes (this purity, of course, is exemplified in the traditional idealization of feminine virginity).

Read through Foucault, the feminization of the speaker’s soul points to the gendered specificity of a historically constructed female identity. The soul corresponds to one’s specific position within the network of power relations, meaning that if power-knowledge reads one’s material body as female, for instance, then one will be policed by — brought up within and reiteratively taught — a specific set of feminine gender norms. The body-soul, or body-

identity, relationship is thus equally a body-gender relationship. Yet the body (sex) does not exist independently of, or prior to, this social construction (of gender); it only reaches us as it has, always already, materially embodied that very construction. For we have just seen “In Plaster” demonstrate how gender norms perpetually affect, and have the potential to be affected by, one’s body: the feminine soul, or gender identity, to which the speaker’s body is assigned, seeks to mold her body into a stereotypically feminine image. Her soul’s aforementioned effort to “fix” her body, to “mend [her] properly,” thus becomes an attempt to make her over into a submissive, pure housewife. This disciplinary dimension also emerges when the speaker realizes that “what she wanted was for me to love her” (13) — the soul desires the adoring conformity of the body.

The body, however, never passively conforms to the soul’s imposition. In Foucault, there remains a discrepancy between one’s body and the socially constructed “soul” that body accrues, simply because (the multiplicity of forces within) each is always changing, changing the other, and changing itself in response to the other. “In Plaster” demonstrates that this unresolved and unresolvable body-soul tension can be experienced very differently, not only by different subjects, but even by the same subject at different times, as a result of the fluidity of both identity (as social

norms change) and of one’s body (as the body changes).

Here I must return to Plath’s account of how the body resists any subservience to an immortal soul, which I began to examine above. We may observe that the major intensification of the body-soul conflict, from its second stage to its third (see above), occurs because “[s]he stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish” (Plath 29). The sibilance in this line, its thrice-repeated alliteration of “s” (more if we include the internal “s” sounds in “closely” and “offish”), creates a hissing sound when read aloud that is not entirely pleasant, mirroring the *offish* nature of the soul at this stage. More to the point, that offish-ness connotes both a hostility and a growing distance between the body and the soul. Whence the source of this distance? If the soul “stopped fitting [the speaker] so closely” — implying, that is, that at some point in the past the soul did fit her more closely (at stage two of the conflict, for those following along) — does this distance increase because of a change in the soul, or a change in the body? Plath — like Foucault — wants it both ways: on the one hand, she writes that “my habits offended *her* in some way” (31); on the other, “I saw what the trouble was: *she* thought *she* was immortal” (35). In this (thirty-)first line, the grammatical subject is the first-person speaker, whom we have established as the body, and the soul is merely the (direct) object which the body angers

through its own habits. Conversely, in line 35, the soul figures as both subject *and* as direct object, which would seem to trace “In Plaster”’s body-soul conflict back to the soul’s own vanity: its purported immortality. Even then, however, the causes for the soul’s anger are not reducible to the soul itself; the soul is not angry because it *wants* to be immortal, but because it thinks that it *really is* immortal, and that the speaker’s inferior mortal vessel is keeping it from its immaterial destiny. Hence, “[s]he wanted to leave me: she thought she was superior, / And I’d been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful” (36-37). In passing, I note the return of hiss-like sibilance in line 36, which here sounds both aloof and unpleasant, amplifying the line’s meaning. Line 37 sees another return: the speaker, or her body, once more occupies the position of subject, confirming that the body’s active participation was necessary to trigger the soul’s change of heart.

At least two conclusions may be drawn here. Firstly, this fifth stanza (lines 29-35) demonstrates that the tension between body and soul is irreducible in origin to either one; it is rather a two-way relationship between inextricable, active forces, either of which may assume the positions of subject or object, and which co-constitute each other through their constant changes. The distance between body and soul changes because each of them changes: the body’s habits cease to conform so closely to the soul’s demands, and the

soul’s anger intensifies as the body’s mortal limitations become increasingly apparent.

Secondly, the fifth stanza intertwines the classical (immortal) and contemporary (identitarian) meanings of “soul”; the soul grows angry at the body not only because of the latter’s mortality, but also because it dislikes the body’s “habits” (31). It may be that the actions of the body “in some way” (31) offend, perhaps even resist, its socially scripted identity — that the body does not move in conformity with normative social ideals of how it *should* move. But before returning more closely to the question of resistance, we must refuse to synonymize the speaker’s “habits” with the voluntarist preferences of a “true self” unconstrained by power relations. Instead, we might read these “habits” as the movements, sometimes conforming and sometimes resistant, of a body always already habituated by power — an interpretation which combines the contemporary definition of “habit,” a “settled or regular tendency,” as well as its archaic definition, “a person’s *bodily* condition or constitution” (*Oxford Dictionaries*). In this way, the body is always already situated within power, yet it remains an active force; and if its material constitution or its habits — both of which are fluid (i.e. habits, like bodies, *can* change) yet viscous (i.e. habits *become* settled, tending to congeal in particular assemblages) — offend its



assigned soul, it incurs criticism (30) and ultimately conflict.

"In Plaster" warns us, though, that resistance to social identity is difficult. Granted, the final lines conclude on an optimistic, transgressive note: "I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her / And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me" (55-6). On the other hand, that the poem ends by thusly imagining a future without a soul leaves the *realization* of that vision radically open: the promise of a victory is not, in itself, a victory, and it remains entirely unclear whether the speaker will ever succeed in actually abandoning her soul. Remember, too, the first line: "I shall never get out of this!" (1) The penultimate stanza also provides evidence of how difficult it would be to resist the soul: "I wasn't in any position to get rid of her. / She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp — / I had forgotten how to walk or sit" (43-45). It is interesting to read these lines in light of the contemporary gendering of walking and sitting (such that bodily movements as simple as swaying one's hips or crossing one's legs are considered overtly feminine); if Plath's speaker finds it hard to walk or sit without her soul's support, this may signal the difficulty of unlearning gendered bodily movements, of walking or sitting otherwise than prescribed by gender norms. That said, the line could also be read as describing resistance to all manner of

other social norms, of which gender is but one.

All of this would seem to imply a rather pessimistic outlook — that the body may finally be unable to overcome the soul, that the self may never escape power — which troubles the revolutionary certainty that "one day [the speaker] will manage without her." Yet, I believe that "In Plaster" also suggests a positive account of resistance, wherein a renewed attention to the body can create valuable new affects and *moments* of resistance, even as it remains unclear whether the soul can be defeated once and for all. Consider carefully the line "I'm collecting my strength": Plath's choice of the word "strength" infuses her speaker's empowerment with a specifically physical or bodily connotation. Not only must the speaker empower herself, but she must do so by strengthening her *body*. (A creative reader might also note that strength tends to be associated with masculinity, making the feminine speaker's performance of strength resistant to gender norms — especially given the aforementioned efforts of the soul to render the feminine body weak and passive.) Likewise with the "habits" I considered above — there too, it is a matter of attending to her body, attempting to hear its demands and protests against the soul. It is also a matter of taking pleasure in her body, appreciating its beauty despite her soul's internalization of social criticism:

see the rose analogy above,  
immediately followed by “it was I who  
attracted everybody’s attention, / Not  
her whiteness and beauty” (18-19).

These emphases on the body resonate,  
of course, with Foucault’s (in)famous  
proclamation that “[t]he rallying point  
for the counterattack against the  
deployment of sexuality ought not to be  
sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures”  
(Foucault, *Sexuality*, 157). Foucault’s  
statement may also help us understand  
why Plath’s “return to the body,” if we  
may call it that, is not yet a return to  
some “True self.” For when Foucault  
cautions against founding resistance  
upon “sex-desire,” he is evoking his  
earlier criticism of the “repressive  
hypothesis,” following which natural  
sex(ual) desire could be extricated and  
so liberated from its repression by  
purely external social forces. “Bodies  
and pleasures,” unlike “sex-desire” or  
an idyllic “true self,” are readily situated  
within power’s network of relations; yet,  
their singularities and contingencies  
render them irreducible to their social  
production (even as they are  
inseparable from that production,  
insofar as they have been conditioned  
by it). It follows that bodies and  
pleasures constantly disrupt power *from  
within* its network: through their

materiality, they recombine, reverse,  
and twist the power-knowledge that  
continually acts upon them.

We have arrived at a very different  
understanding of “In Plaster” than  
confessional readings would allow. The  
“I” that Plath narrates is no “true self,”  
but a self that comes to us already  
having been conditioned by “her.”  
Furthermore, this is a corporeal self,  
whose resistance has less to do with  
escaping the shackles of society — for it  
remains uncertain whether such an  
escape is finally possible — and more to  
do with living the body in new ways:  
cultivating resistant habits, learning to  
move differently, and treasuring  
corporeal beauty. In so valuing the  
body, Plath resists both the soul’s  
disembodiment in classical tradition and  
the soul’s inscription of (feminine)  
identity in contemporary biopower:  
standing within these twin traditions,  
she transvalues them, taking their most  
despised corporeal elements and  
learning to appreciate them anew. And  
so the “I” changes, not so much by  
stepping outside of its plaster (a.k.a.  
power relations), as by recomposing the  
plaster of which it is made — changing,  
potentially, the plaster along with the  
“I.”

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# Searching for Connotations and Connections

## Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Paul Ricoeur, and the Language of Madness.

by Jessica Louise Phillips

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Sylvia Plath's first novel *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963 and released in England just weeks before she committed suicide in her London home (Ames 279). It was then published some eight years later in 1971 in the USA. The novel is a first-person account of Esther Greenwood; a nineteen-year-old aspiring writer who, while on a writing internship in New York, begins to feel that something is "wrong" with her. Upon returning home to the desultory suburbs of Boston, she discovers that she has not been accepted for a competitive summer writing course at Harvard. This news catalyses for Esther several suicide attempts and admissions to psychiatric wards. In short, *The Bell Jar* charts Esther's experience of madness.

This article will argue that in *The Bell Jar*, readers are forced to engage with uncertainties of language. Plath's writing brings words that do not share obvious connections into relation through implicit and explicit

comparisons—that is through metaphor and simile. These comparisons produce a semantic tension that surprises the reader. "Surprise" occurs through the contradiction of readers' expectations and the uncovering of hidden relationships between disparate terms, which together leads to the development of a new "kind" of knowledge about Esther's subjective experience of madness. I will argue that ambiguity and semantic tension are positive attributes of Plath's writing because they reveal the extent to which readers can never be certain about what she is attempting to convey about Esther's experience. An inevitable, universal interpretation of her work is unattainable. The only interpretation readers can be certain of is their own, which is brought about through the conscious act of searching for unlikely connections and connotations amongst the plethora of implicit and explicit relations Plath draws between disparate terms. I will argue that this very act of searching for meaning in *The Bell Jar* invites

readers to negotiate new perspectives for understanding the experience of madness, and that this act of “working” to derive meaning from a highly idiosyncratic vocabulary has the capacity to aid the development of empathy in readers, precisely because it reveals a common difficulty we all face in using a predefined vocabulary to express complex thoughts, feelings and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I will demonstrate that in contrast to the stabilised understandings of madness that the language of science, and for the purposes of this paper, of psychiatry, as laid out in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-fifth edition (The DSM-V)*, Plath offers readers a powerful alternative that indirectly reveals the problems associated with using a scientific paradigm to describe and promote understanding into and about the experience of madness: a powerful alternative that reveals a common human vulnerability and therefore has the capacity to aid the development of empathy (Charon 898; Shapiro 478; Flynn 36 )<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this article I have chosen, after considerable thought, discussion and research of primary source material, to use the general and more ambiguous term “madness” rather than “mental illness” when referring to Esther’s experiences of psychological distress. The reason for this is three-

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<sup>1</sup> I will discuss empathy in full in the third section of this article.

fold. Firstly, in surveying Plath’s journals, it is evident that the term she most frequently used to describe the types of stories she wanted to write were “mad stories.” She writes in one entry, three years before the publication of *The Bell Jar* in September of 1958:

How much life I have known:  
love, disillusion, madness,  
hatred, murderous passion.  
How to be honest. I see  
beginnings, flashes, yet how to  
organise them knowledgably,  
to finish them. I will write mad  
stories. But honest. I know the  
horror of primal feelings,  
obsessions (Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 511-512).

She echoes this sentiment in a later entry on the fifteenth of November of the same year, wherein she writes, “I have experienced love, sorrow, madness, and if I cannot make these experiences meaningful, no new experience will help me” (530). It therefore seems that it was Plath’s intention in *The Bell Jar* and elsewhere in her writing, to depict “primal” and “mad” experiences as honestly and “meaningfully” as she possibly could.

Secondly, in conducting an extensive survey of the popular reviews written about *The Bell Jar* both after its publication in the United Kingdom in 1963 and in the United States of America in 1971, it is evident that reviewers tend to resist classifying the experience Plath depicts throughout

*The Bell Jar* as “mental illness.” They instead construe it as “a reconstruction of a mind slipping away from its owner,” (Petroski n.p) whilst acknowledging that “terms like *mad* and *sane* grow increasingly inadequate as *The Bell Jar* develops [...] as by the time we learn how Esther got to be *psychotic* the word itself (or any diagnostic term) has ceased to be relevant” (Moss 73-75). While some reviewers, such as William Coe find the absence of diagnostic terminology an “inadequacy,” (n.p) arguing that the “lack of psychological justification” (n.p) fails to make for a convincing depiction of a breakdown, others, such as Dero Coleman agree that “such deep penetration into the mysterious and harrowing corners of the mind is most unusual in any novel,” (Coleman n.p) and that Plath’s poetic prose draws the reader “into [Esther’s] mental breakdown with such intensity that the insanity becomes real and even rational” (Coleman n.p).

Thirdly, this essay’s objective is to argue that the deterministic or stabilised understandings of madness as articulated by *The DSM-V* are inadequate when it comes to learning about the idiosyncrasies that characterise an individual’s experience. That is, diagnostic terminology fails us when seeking to know, “what is it like to be you?” To overlay Esther’s experience with diagnostic terminology would only seek to reproduce a stabilised understanding of a lived experience that is anything but.

This article will be divided into three parts. To begin, I will outline French theorist Paul Ricoeur’s non-reductive theory of metaphor and use it to clearly delineate simile from metaphor. Ricoeur will serve as the methodological frame needed to better understand what Plath’s language is doing, and how it is doing it. In the third section of this article, I will attempt to define empathy, a prickly term and concept at best, and discuss the existing criticism that argues for the importance of literary depictions of madness like Plath’s in clinical settings. In the final section, I will conduct a close textual analysis of Plath’s writing in *The Bell Jar* using three of the key criteria as outlined in *The DSM-V* for “Major Depressive Disorder.” I will conclude by advocating for, as others such as Charon and Shapiro have done, the importance of accounts like Plath’s alongside the use of psychiatric manuals like *The DSM-V* in the training of health professionals and in the treatment of those experiencing psychological distress.

## **Paul Ricoeur: A Non-Reductive Theory of Metaphor**

Paul Ricoeur, in his non-reductionist theory of metaphor conceives of metaphor as a semantic event capable of expressing the “more” of experience and understanding whilst exploding meaning and breaking the text open to the life-world (McGaughey 418-421). For Ricoeur, it



is the tension generated in the metaphorical statement as well as the implicit connections made between two terms that enable nuances, insight and hidden connections to be revealed. Ricoeur argues that metaphor produces new knowledge and insight because it brings two terms into an implicit comparison and in doing so, generates in language a new relationship that is not explicitly articulated and is therefore capable of surprising the reader, contradicting their expectations, uncovering hidden connections and producing new knowledge (27-30). For Ricoeur metaphor teaches us something new by contributing to the opening up of field of reality of which ordinary language is not capable of laying bare (174). While Plath uses metaphor to describe Esther's experience of madness she also uses an abundance of similes for the same purpose. It is important that the two are clearly differentiated from one another, as there is a tendency in the existing criticism pertaining to *The Bell Jar* to conflate metaphor with simile and to not attend to the differences between the two.<sup>3</sup>

Ricoeur argues that simile occupies the field of metaphor; however, the two are distinct. Simile and metaphor

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<sup>3</sup> For examples see Hunt and Carter, "Seeing Through *The Bell Jar*," 32-34; Smith, "Metaphors for Mental Distress: Looking through *The Bell Jar*," 355-359; Nora Sellei, "The Fig Tree and The Patent Leather Shoes: The Body and its Representation in *The Bell Jar*," 130; Diane Bonds, "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar," 49-64.

are alike in that they both involve two relations, yet they differ in the explicit and implicit comparisons they make between two terms (27). Similes use "like" or "as" to draw direct comparisons between two terms while metaphor draws a more implicit comparison between two terms instead making a less direct attribution (27-29). For Ricoeur, simile makes deliberate comparisons to draw connections between two terms and in doing so reduces dynamism, dissipates surprise and fails to provoke inquiry in the same way that the implicit comparisons made in metaphor do (29). In short, simile is explicit where metaphor is implicit and for Ricoeur, it is the implicit connections drawn between two terms that leads to the apprehension of new knowledge, connections and relations.

In the discussion of empathy and the language of *The Bell Jar* to follow I also argue that the similes used throughout *The Bell Jar* do lead to the production of a new kind of knowledge when used to talk about the idiosyncratic, subjective experience of madness because they do not rely, as Ricoeur argues upon a perceived resemblance that already exists within the discourse and between terms (29-30). The comparisons that Plath makes using "like" or "as" are not simply facts of discourse waiting to be given a name, rather they are comparisons highly particular to Esther's idiosyncratic experience. They produce a new kind of knowledge about the lived

experience of madness because they are grounded in lived experience, not divorced from it (Flynn 39). Plath's language produces an alternative that enables a particularistic voice to be heard and for new dimensions of the experience of illness that are frequently absent from a psychiatric discourse to be voiced (Charon 898; Shapiro 476).

Before moving on to discuss Plath in further detail, I will briefly recount Ricoeur's theory of meaning within the metaphorical statement. This will support us in understanding why a vocabulary capable of revealing local and particular knowledge about Esther's individual experience of madness can aid the development of empathy in readers and is therefore essential if a gap is to be bridged between a logo-scientific understanding of madness and the lived experience of it.

Ricoeur distinguishes between literal or objective and spiritual or intellectual meaning. Objective meaning, he argues, is not opposed to spiritual or intellectual meaning but is the basic meaning of the proposition; the meaning that arises relative to the object to which it applies (57). The literal meaning of a proposition is that which is "borne by words taken letter by letter, by words understood the way they are accepted in common usage [...] literal meaning therefore suggests itself immediately to those who understand the language" (56-57). For Ricoeur, the spiritual meaning

of a proposition is the diverted or figurative meaning of a group of words; that which the literal meaning causes to be borne in the spirit by the means of the circumstances of the discourse, by the tone of voice or by expressed connections that exhibit unarticulated relationships (58).

Tropological meaning can be extended further and understood as what arises when one steps into the breach where language lacks the words for a certain idea or experience (58). For Ricoeur, the "semantic collision" that occurs between tenor and vehicle force designation to give way to connotation, therefore giving rise to multiplicity of meaning and to surprising connections (112).<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur makes it clear that tropological meaning does not suggest itself immediately to readers. It requires concerted engagement and a willingness to step into the breach. In short, tropological meaning arises as readers come to acknowledge the difficulty inherent in making meaning of complex thoughts and feelings from a limited menu of words.

Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Plath repeatedly steps into what Ricoeur terms the breach, the space where tropological meaning arises, by

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<sup>4</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines denotation as the term employed to describe a thing-to denote is to mark out or distinguish one thing from another. Connotation by contrast is that which is implied in a word in addition to the primary or essential meaning. A connotation is an additional layer of meaning beyond what the term primarily denotes.

consequence of one lacking the literal language to express inherently complex feelings and thoughts. That Plath is constantly stepping into this breach is further evidence of the limits the language of science has for expressing the nuanced subjectivity particular to the experience of madness.

We shall now move to a brief discussion of empathy. This discussion will reveal why a discourse that aids the development of empathy for the experience of madness and catalyses the emergence of new perspectives for understanding and describing it is critical in our current time and place.

## Empathy and Madness

*Empathy* is both a contentious term and a contentious concept. There is a general lack of consensus in both the scientific and philosophical literature as to what empathy is, and what it is not (Coplan 5-6; Prinz 212-213 Debes 219-222; de Vignemont and Singer 435-436). Empathy as a term is shown to have its roots in early twentieth century German aesthetic theory as the English translation of the German *Einfühlung* or, the act of "feeling one's way into the subjective experience of another" (Lipps 415-440; Keen 208-210). And as a concept, its history traces back as far, perhaps further than Aristotle who in *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia* wrote of synonymous concepts such as "friendly feeling," (*Eudemian* 1966) "goodwill," (*Nicomachean* 1753) "pity" (*Nicomachean* 1754) and

"righteous indignation," (*Magna* 1886).

In popular discourse, one of the most common conceptions of empathy is what Amy Coplan terms, "self-orientated perspective taking," (9) and Peter Goldie terms "in his shoes perspective shifting" (302). It is the kind of quality Barack Obama emphasises in his often-cited commencement speech at Xavier University, New Orleans a year on from Hurricane Katrina in 2006 when he urges students to "put [themselves] in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from [them] (Obama)."

In contemporary narrative theory, empathy is regarded as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, hearing about another's condition or even by reading" (Keen 208-210). For Suzanne Keen, author of *Empathy and the Novel*, empathy is both cognitive and affective in that it involves both feeling and thinking and is distinguished from sympathy which is considered to be the act of pitying the circumstances of someone we perceive to be in a worse situation to ourselves, or feeling a supportive emotion about their feelings, rather than essentially feeling what they feel (209). Keen argues that some feminist and postcolonial critics claim that empathy loses all legitimacy when it appeals to a notion of universal human emotions, or when empathy is taken to mean that "I know

what you feel" (223). In this article, it is important to emphasise that I do not wish to claim that empathic connection with Esther is akin to feeling the same *pain* as her. Rather, I am arguing that Plath invites readers to imaginatively reconstruct what it would be like to *be* Esther and that through this reconstruction, commonalities between reader and protagonist are revealed which in turn urges readers to regard Esther not as wholly other, but as irreducibly like themselves (Nussbaum 319). Empathy, for our purposes in reading and examining *The Bell Jar* could therefore manifest as a very basic recognition of a shared human vulnerability; a regarding of Esther as a human being with the same *capacity* for vulnerability, pain, and the like as readers. Plath's strenuous efforts at locating verbal equivalents for Esther's experience are in themselves an expression of vulnerability; an expression of the limits that language has for describing difficult and oftentimes complex thoughts and feelings. This in turn, serves as an implicit critique of the stabilised understandings of madness promoted by science through manuals such as *The DSM-V*.

Empathy's development is therefore made possible in readers of *The Bell Jar* as a result of the ambiguity and partiality that metaphor and simile create. This ambiguity and partiality presents readers with an invitation to invest themselves in making meaning from the unlikely connections that

Plath draws between disparate terms. Through the act of searching for meaning and the exercising of a genuine curiosity to know "what it is like to be you {her}," the "vicarious and spontaneous sharing of affect," and the "imaginative reconstruction" that Keen and moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum respectively draw our attention to, may indeed begin to occur.

Social Worker Martin Smith argues that metaphor can act as a route to empathy; however, "eligibility" seems to have replaced "empathy" as the word for our times. He suggests that "the metaphor of the market place has replaced that of the community centre in the world of social work" (360). This is troubling because, as Smith attests, in a world of increasing bureaucracy and analysis where "service-users" are allocated to reductionist tick boxes to be deemed eligible or ineligible for clinical services, understanding has been reduced to categorisation and thus empathy is therefore never more important (360). Plath's writing, he argues, offers clinical professionals a powerful paradigm for understanding the experience of madness—one that fundamentally shifts the depth of the patient-clinician relationship to the extent that new perspectives and responses by those in the caring professions are made possible (361). Likewise, Johanna Shapiro argues that fictional accounts of madness enable empathy to enter the patient-clinician relationship as they enable differing points of view and particularistic

details about an individual's experience of madness to be brought to life (477-478). She describes that in her work teaching art and literature to medical students, fictional narratives depicting a character's experience of madness give voices that are often ignored or silenced by the medical hierarchy the opportunity to express an alternative story of illness: one that does not centre around a vulnerable person being diagnosed, objectified and treated by an authoritative clinician (477). Furthermore, Shapiro argues that fictional accounts of madness like Plath's are full of particularistic details that are frequently left out or deemed irrelevant to the patients' diagnosis or illness experience (478). She claims that Plath's novel exposes the gap between doctor and patient (between Esther and Dr Gordon) and argues that healing cannot take place in the absence of empathy (481-487). For Shapiro, immersion in the highly particularistic worldviews and experiences of a patient's illness enables clinicians and readers to recognise the patient or character not as wholly "other" but as sharing similarities and irreducible differences with themselves (478). In short, fictional accounts of madness may aid the development of empathy and the deepening of patient-clinician relationships that are predicated on mutual respect and shared commonalities.

While Shapiro and Smith discuss the importance of metaphor in increasing

understanding and generating new insight into the nuanced particulars of an individual's experience of madness, they do not bring narrative theory to bear on these questions and therefore present an opportunity for me to do so. I would like to suggest that in directly comparing the language of Plath with the language of *The DSM-V*, informed by a non-reductive narrative theory of metaphor, we can come to better grasp how Plath's language is achieving an affect that is so radically different to the stabilised language of science, and therefore be better positioned to encourage the use of alternative vocabularies in the training of clinical professionals and the treatment of those experiencing madness. As I will show in the comparative analysis that follows, it is through Plath's elaborate similes and metaphorical descriptions, that she reveals how psychiatry's attempts at classifying, unifying and constraining experience into discrete units of measurement are thwarted as subjective experience will always consist of disparate and fragmentary thoughts and feelings that cannot be readily assimilated into objectively discernible criteria, sub criteria and numerical codes.

The remainder of the article will be devoted to a comparative analysis of the language of *The Bell Jar* with that of *The DSM-V*. This analysis will serve to underscore my contention that a psychiatric discourse is radically insufficient and incapable of both aiding the development of empathy

and promoting a greater depth of understanding into and about the idiosyncrasies inherent to an individual's experience of madness, as evidenced in *The Bell Jar*.

### **Plath and *The DSM-V*: Observing the Differences**

In this section I will directly contrast two of the criteria within *The DSM-V* for "Major Depressive Disorder" with the language used to describe Esther's experience of madness within *The Bell Jar*. I have chosen to situate Esther's experience alongside individual criteria from within *The DSM-V* to illustrate the extent to which Plath's metaphors and similes aid the development of empathy and produce a new kind of knowledge about the lived experience of madness. These qualities are best observed when the two discourses are viewed side by side. Through this direct comparison, a very human vulnerability is shown to underscore Esther's experience; a vulnerability that is not alien, foreign or unknowable to readers. In using metaphor and simile to represent and describe the experience of madness, Plath deepens her readers understanding of and empathy with the complexity inherent to expressing distressing thoughts and feelings from a limited vocabulary of words, whilst reducing the status of Esther as wholly "other" to a person sharing similarities and irreducible differences with readers (Shapiro 478). This direct comparison will also make evident the ways in which the diagnostic criteria of *The DSM-V* force and constrain the

fragmented experience of madness into observable, discrete units of measurement.

Throughout *The Bell Jar*, there is no clear delineation between the different types of symptoms Esther experiences. Her experience is comprised of intersecting and divergent thoughts, feelings and behaviours. My choice of "symptoms" or examples from *The Bell Jar* to align with the criteria from *The DSM-V* is therefore arbitrary and in no way intends to diagnose or render Esther a case to be examined objectively. Such an analysis alongside *The DSM-V* that does not intend to diagnose Esther has, to date, not been performed in the existing critical literature.

#### *Criteria 4a: Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day*

The first criterion I will use to establish a contrast with the language of *The Bell Jar* is criteria 4a: "Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day" (The American Psychiatric Association 161). Esther's sleep starts to become increasingly disrupted when she returns home to Boston at the end of her internship. Upon receiving word from her mother that she didn't make the writing course that had been stretching out before her "like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer," (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 110) she is sent to psychiatrist Dr. Gordon wherein having "not slept for seven nights," (130) tells Dr Gordon of this but not of her inability to write. He

then makes the decision to send her for Electro Shock Therapy (ECT) at his private hospital in Walton. Prior to her first meeting with Dr Gordon, Esther tells her mother one night that she has a “terrible headache” and goes early to bed; an hour later her mother inches the door open, undresses and climbs into bed (117). Esther watches the “pin curls on her head glittering like a row of little bayonets,” (118) before being engulfed by competing and conflicting plans that leap through her head “like a family of scatty rabbits” (118). To spend the summer writing a novel, reading *Finnegan’s Wake*, writing her thesis, apprenticing herself to a pottery maker, working her way to Germany to become a bilingual waitress and never learning shorthand are but some of the ideas she conjures. Before long the room “blues [sic] into view,” (118) and Esther feigns sleep until her mother has left for her teaching job. She then goes on to describe the experience of being unable to sleep:

Even my eyelids didn’t shut out the light. They hung the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels in front of me like a wound. I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt very dark and very safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. I needed about a tonne more to make me sleep (118-119).

Through Plath’s elaborate similes and metaphorical descriptions of the experience of insomnia, readers gain access to a highly subjective, nuanced understanding of Esther’s particular experience – one that is otherwise reduced by the medical establishment to a tick box, providing readers (and clinicians) with no new knowledge or insight both about and into the felt experience of insomnia or hypersomnia, as well as the internal and external factors that generate it. One interpretation that can be gleaned from this excerpt is that Esther’s inability to sleep does not derive from an insidious indwelling pathology, but is the result of a mounting mental chaos that concerns her relationship with her overbearing mother and the paralysis that extends from “wanting to shoot off in all directions like a fourth of July rocket” (79) while simultaneously feeling as though she has nothing to look forward to. Esther’s insomnia is both internally and externally generated; the consequence of her inability to resolve personal and social contradictions in her waking hours. Such concerns permeate her mind night after night and prevent her from resting. Let us now look more closely at the figurative language employed in these examples to ascertain how Plath is extending meaning and producing new knowledge about Esther’s experience of insomnia.

The direct comparison drawn between pin curls and glittering bayonets using the term ‘like’ enables readers to

glimpse new understanding about Esther's relationship with her mother. This explicit comparison generates a semantic tension that surprises and when glimpsed closely, reveals an insidious hidden nuance inherent to their relationship, one that could easily be cast aside. Bayonet denotes a very sharp sword like stabbing knife; a weapon to be used to defend oneself in hand-to-hand combat. The pairing of "glittering" with "bayonet" corrupts the original meaning of bayonet and of glittering and when explicitly paired with "pin curls" comes to connote superficiality, unpredictability; a superficial appearance that masquerades as approachable, yet beneath is violent, guarded, dangerous and deceitful. The semantic tension generated by these opposing connotations being at once attractive and benign yet violent and malevolent enables local and particular knowledge about Esther's experience to be revealed. The pin curls on Esther's mother's head, "glittering like a row of little bayonets," says more about Esther's relationship with her mother than an attempt at a purely literal exclamation, *my mother and I have a difficult relationship* ever could. This direct comparison and the tension it generates suggests that Esther's relationship with her mother is one of tension, of competing and contradictory feelings, attitudes and positions; one that is superficially benevolent, but beneath festers as malignant, tense, insincere and threatening. Furthermore, that Esther

is sharing a bedroom with her mother suggests that even through sleep or what little Esther is achieving she cannot escape the tension inherent to their relationship; she cannot escape the glittering row of little bayonets and therefore her efforts at rest are greatly reduced.

The direct comparison between "the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels" that is her exhausted eyes and wound using the term 'like' produces new insight into Esther's experience of insomnia. Wound evokes connotations of vulnerability, pain and a kind of violent sensitivity (Bonds 51). Interestingly, the eyelids are also given agency over Esther within the simile, implied by "they hung" and "in front of me" (Plath 119). This agency afforded to her eyelids suggests that Esther feels detached, disconnected from and steered by a body that is acting of its own accord. Plath therefore extends meaning by attributing Esther's lack of sleep in part to the plans running through her mind like a family of scatty rabbits, to imply that Esther is no longer in control of or deciding the direction of her life. Readers can therefore appreciate with this new information about Esther's experience of insomnia, the extent to which insomnia for her is not simply difficulty sleeping or the inability to sleep but rather an experience that is comprised of fragments of pain, sensitivity, vulnerability, a lack of agency, control, dissociation and a tension that is the consequence of internal and external



conditions. Reducing the experience of insomnia to a solitary unit of measurement or a homogenous experience as *The DSM-V* would have us do, generates no new knowledge as to the human experience of it. The connotations that extend from this simile therefore expand the readers understanding into and about Esther's subjective experience of madness. These connotations and the act of searching for them helps readers to perceive Esther not as wholly other or the host of an insidious indwelling pathology, but rather a human person bearing similarities to their own experiences, that is, they succeed in revealing commonalities that can aid the development of empathy in readers for her predicament.

The final example in this discussion of criteria 4a that I will unpick in depth is the statement, "I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone" (119). The direct comparison made between the mattress and a tombstone using the term "like" in the above simile reveals an additional layer of nuance above and beyond those that have already been discussed in relation to Esther's subjective experience of insomnia.

The image of a tombstone connotes death, a grave, graveyard and a weathered, heavy and oftentimes illegible memory of a life. One's first inclination when reading this simile is to conflate tombstone with coffin or earth leading to a dissipation of

surprise as this is an obvious connection; a resemblance that already exists within discourse. However, in burial it is not the tombstone that falls across the body or coffin, but dirt, sand and earth. To replace dirt, earth or sand with tombstone in this simile suggests that Esther feels as though she is already dead; she is already buried and the tombstone which would act as a beacon to the living, to denote the position of her body beneath the earth has fallen across the remains of her body, making the memory of her life to the living world invisible. Thus, one interpretation may be that Plath likens Esther's experience of insomnia to an invisible death. Through the direct comparison of mattress and tombstone Plath generates new knowledge about Esther's experience of insomnia and by extension of madness by creating new connections and relations that are not facts of discourse or obvious relations. What Plath achieves through drawing unlike terms into a direct comparison using the idiosyncratic vocabulary she affords to Esther is to make it clear that subjective experience will never be linear and uniform, but will always consist of disparate thoughts and feelings and be informed by internal and external conditions. In doing so she makes the development of empathy possible through the nuanced insight she generates into Esther's subjective worldview. Thus, to reduce subjective experience to criteria, sub criteria, numerical codes will, as long as *The DSM-V* pervades

and informs Western culture's common sense understanding of madness, thwart attempts to aid the development of empathy in those treating and caring for those living through madness. If we are to glimpse an understanding into the lived experience of madness, we need to engage with the inconsistent, ambiguous, nuanced vocabularies used by those enduring madness, not the rule stabilised language of psychiatry (Rowe 30).

*Criteria 9a: Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.*

The second and final criterion from *The DSM-V* that I will use to draw a direct comparison with Esther's subjective experience of madness and the idiosyncratic vocabulary she uses to describe it is 9a "Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide" (The American Psychiatric Association 161).

The intensity of Esther's preoccupation with suicide increases after she endures her first shock treatment at Dr Gordon's private hospital in Walton. In the days and weeks after this treatment she attempts suicide three times and remains preoccupied by death and dying until she is taken by Mrs Guinea,

her scholarship donor, to a big "private state hospital in the country" (178). It is perhaps Esther's spontaneous trip to the beach at Deer Island where she grew up with her father until he passed away, where readers gain a particularly rich insight into the internal and external conditions that together motivate her desire for death.

After talking with a prison guard near the edge of the beach, Esther thinks to herself:

If I'd had the sense to go on living in that old town I might have just met this prison guard in school and married him and had a parcel of kids by now. It would be nice, living up by the sea with piles of kids and pigs and chickens, wearing what my grandmother calls wash dresses, and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee (144).

This image of married life Esther conjures is antithetical to the desired identity where she is not someone's sweetheart, girlfriend, wife or mother, that she has envisaged and sought after for herself up until this point in the novel (Wagner 57). In chapter one of the novel, Esther makes the fierce claim after finding "fault after fault" in Buddy Willard that she hates the very thought of being married, exclaiming, "the last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow

shoots from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot of in all directions myself" (79). Readers can appreciate through the decidedly cynical evocation of married life Plath conjures, that for Esther such a life by the sea would be anything but "nice." Rather it would mute her hunger for change, excitement and personal autonomy. This imaginative exercise in envisaging married life whilst preparing to commit suicide also reveals how dominated her thinking is by the inevitable allotment of boredom, routine and domestic responsibility she is so desperate to resist. Thus, through this interpretation it is shown that Esther's numerous suicide attempts and ideations about death stem not from a wholly individual, indwelling pathology but from her difficulties at reconciling her subjective wants with a normalising cultural paradigm that deems her pathological for her deviation and opposition to it.

Whilst on the beach, Esther notices that she is the only girl in a skirt and high heels. She removes her patent leather shoes as they founder badly in the sand and as she walks down to the surf she reflects, "It pleased me to think that they would be perched there on a silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul compass after I was dead" (146). As her feet "wince in cowardice from such a death" (147) she decides not to go through with ending her life. She turns back and walks "over the cold stones" (147) to where her shoes "kept their vigil in the

violet light" (147). Interestingly, what readers observe here again is Esther's experience of a loss of agency and control over her body. Esther's loss of control over her body is implied through the agency Plath affords to Esther's feet, as they "wince" in cowardice from such a death. The repeated emphasis afforded to Esther's lack or loss of personal agency and autonomy throughout the novel points to an important nuance about her wanting to end her life, as well as the symbolic significance inherent to the recurring motif of the patent leather shoes. It is to this nuance and the symbolic significance of the patent leather shoes and what they might reveal about Esther's subjective experience of madness that I will now turn my attention.

Esther's patent leather shoes feature repeatedly throughout *The Bell Jar*. It is in the first chapter however that their symbolic value is determined. In chapter one of the novel, Esther claims that fashion conscious, attention to detail impressed her, "it suggested a whole life of marvellous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet" (5). The black patent leather shoes from the onset of the novel symbolise what a college girl like Esther should aspire toward: to be beautiful, well-groomed and affable. However, for Esther the patent leather shoes also symbolise autonomy, independence and freedom. The patent leather shoes were bought by Esther with her own money from *Bloomingdale's* whilst on her lunch

break from her writing internship, that she herself secured as a result of her talent for writing and dedication to her studies. In short, the black patent leather shoes symbolise a freedom and autonomy that Esther cannot obtain from other persons, objects and even her own body; they symbolise her highest values and encapsulate her reasons for fervently resisting marrying someone and relinquishing her freedom. Her sentimental attachment to them throughout the novel reveals that despite Esther's dissociation from her body and lack of agency over it as she descends into madness, she remains tethered to her ideals of freedom and autonomy and by extension to the hope that one day she will be "all right again" (3) and regain the autonomy she had once lost. In short, the patent leather shoes remind her of her highest values and for that reason their recurrence is not ornamental. The direct comparison made between the patent leather shoes and a soul compass reveals hidden layers of meaning and produces new knowledge about Esther's subjective experience of suicidal ideation and the beliefs, attitudes and unrealised ideals that have led her to want to end her life. "Soul compass" denotes a direction or life path that is determined by something greater and bigger than oneself. It denotes a life path that is highly particular and idiosyncratic to the individual. Soul compass brings to bear connotations of inevitability, purpose, spirituality, guidance, autonomy and

unconditional support. The semantic collision that results when the patent leather shoes and soul compass are brought into a direct comparison produces a new kind of knowledge about the internal and external conditions generating Esther's suicidal thoughts and feelings and the symbolic importance of the patent leather shoes. The patent leather shoes tether Esther to her values of independence and autonomy; the same values that enabled a girl from the country to buy a pair from *Bloomingdale's* with her own money on her lunch break. Likening the shoes to a soul compass may also suggest that Esther's decision to end her life is motivated by her desire to preserve her autonomy. Her dreams of pursuing a competitive writing course at university have been extinguished, she cannot read, sleep or write and feels imprisoned and frustrated by her mother's hawk like observations, deceitfulness and insistence that she visit a psychiatrist to rid her of inability to "behave" (169). Suicide therefore, in a climate where her decisions are not her own can be read as an attempt at reclaiming her personal autonomy: suicide represents for Esther the ultimate assertion of freedom. Therefore, by bringing the patent leather shoes and soul compass into a direct comparison a hidden relationship is uncovered about the internal and external conditions that are together motivating her desire for death. In short, this simile produces a new kind of knowledge about Esther's experience of madness that is derived

from experience, therefore offering the insight, depth and richness needed to humanise Esther and aid the development of empathy in readers.

The numerous symbolic and figurative references Plath employs to convey the motivations underpinning Esther's quest to end her own life, underscore the complexity inherent in making coherent meaning of subjective experience from a limited vocabulary of words, whilst introducing aspects of experience that are frequently absent from a psychiatric discourse.

Therefore, to appreciate the nuance and personal significance for Esther in her quest for death and not deem it purely pathological or an expression of "bad behaviour," one must search for hidden connections and connotations. Readers must be prepared to step into the breach where language lacks the literal terms for a specific experience and to wait for hidden relationships to emerge. This requires patience and it is an exercise that may aid the development of empathy.

The language of *The DSM-V* in regards to "recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide," tells us nothing nuanced about the subjective human experience of suicidal ideation and what drives, sustains and motivates a person's desire to end their life (The American Psychiatric

Association 161). Criteria 9a tells us nothing that will aid empathy and the development of new perspectives into and about the subjective experience of the individual enduring such thoughts. What this language does succeed in, however, is to imply that recurring thoughts of suicide are abnormal. In short, criteria 9a renders suicidal ideation a dangerous pathology. The danger in reducing suicidal thinking to a pathology that must be urgently remedied is that little curiosity, patience and empathy are exercised to reveal the central motivations underpinning one's desire for death. It is these highly particular insights, however, that are necessary to aid the development of empathy and in turn to offer effective care and support to another to enable them to get well.

This interpretation made of Plath's writing is an attempt at foregrounding the human vulnerabilities and complexity inherent to Esther's preoccupation with death and dying. This interpretation is by no means definitive. What it does suggest is that it is Esther's inability to reconcile her inner subjective wants and desires, for autonomy, freedom and independence with the cultural norms that deem her deviant for wanting such things that underpins her desire for death. For Esther, suicide represents the ultimate assertion of personal freedom. Plath, by employing a vocabulary that is highly particular to Esther's idiosyncratic experience of madness, resists

pathologising the experience of suicidal ideation. Rather she succeeds to aid the development of empathy in her readers by rendering Esther not as wholly other but as a person at a loss to reconcile social and personal contradictions.

## Conclusion

The metaphors and similes Plath uses to describe Esther's experience of madness illustrate that a stabilised, scientific vocabulary stifles the development of empathy because it dehumanises the very human experiences to which it refers. It is through metaphor and simile in *The Bell Jar* that Plath gives sought-after words and nuanced meaning to difficult thoughts, feelings and subjective experiences, which in turn, enables highly nuanced details about illness that are frequently absent from the psychiatric paradigm to be voiced.

Plath reveals through her metaphors and elaborate similes that what *The DSM-V* would delineate as discrete behaviours and experiences, when lived out consist of complex, intersecting and divergent layers of disparate thoughts, feelings and behaviours. As we have seen insomnia can be both internally and externally generated and sustained by pervasive indecision and a distrust in those

closest to us and suicidal ideation can be motivated by an insatiable hunger for autonomy and freedom. Forcing a conglomeration of experiences into unifying criteria or denoting such with numerical codes therefore seems incongruous with what Plath's figurative discourse reveals about lived experience.

The tension that Plath's writing generates enables her to convey something very precise about madness and the difficulties we face in our cultural and political lives (Rose 10). Her precision lies in her imprecision. That is, through Plath's prolific use of simile and metaphor, she precisely reveals the limits language has for expressing human vulnerability and in doing so exposes the pitfalls inherent in striving for a vocabulary that masquerades as precise, objective or stable because it is grounded in science. For Plath, this is simply not realisable, nor may it be desirable as it perverts the elucidation of the very vulnerability necessary for human connection and empathy. Plath enables readers to acknowledge that so long as we attempt to contain, classify and determine the existence of madness through objective measures alone, we will thwart our ability to cultivate the insight and empathy needed to heal those in crisis.

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# Female Relationships, Motherhood, and Loss of Language in *The Bell Jar* and “Mothers”

by Mariana Chaves Petersen

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True stories are the ones that lie open at the  
border, allowing a crossing, a further frontier. The  
final frontier is just science fiction – don’t believe  
it. Like the universe, there is no end.

Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*

Words dry and riderless,  
The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

Sylvia Plath, “Words”

A common critical approach to Sylvia Plath’s stories is to investigate themes that are also developed in *The Bell Jar*, her poetry, journals, and letters. Luke Ferretter’s 2010 *Sylvia Plath’s Fiction: A Critical Study* is known to be the first in-depth study to focus on her novels and short stories, while also relating them to her poetry, biography, and historical context. There are previous studies on

Plath’s short stories, but without the aim of covering most of her narrative, such as Melody Zajdel’s 1984 “Apprenticed in a Bible of Dreams: Sylvia Plath’s Short Stories,” which discusses a few of Plath’s stories by relating them to *The Bell Jar*. In this essay, I follow a similar methodology and analyze the story “Mothers” in relation to Plath’s so far only published novel.

Finished in August 1961 and published in 1963,<sup>1</sup> *The Bell Jar* shows Esther Greenwood's struggle to regain her interest in words and picture a future for herself other than the possibilities commonly attributed to women in the 1950s U.S. Psychologically unstable from the beginning of the novel, Esther starts considering suicide when she comes back home from an internship in New York; she undergoes a breakdown that eventually precludes her from both reading and writing. Through a series of flashbacks, the reader gets to know these difficult events from her past, as well as her present-time situation: she is writing her story from another stage in life, in which she is already a mother. In fact, motherhood is one of *The Bell Jar*'s most recurring themes, especially young Esther's relationship with her mother and her anxieties about becoming one herself.

Similarly, motherhood is the central point of Plath's "Mothers," written in 1962.<sup>2</sup> With a keen third-person narrator, the story portrays the complexity of wanting to belong to a place while being critical of its social hypocrisies. Like *The Bell Jar*, the story

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1. For information about the date at which Plath finished writing *The Bell Jar*, see Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*, and Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 438, 696.

2. I am here following Ted Hughes's dating in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*.

also has a main character named Esther, here a married woman who has a small child and is again pregnant. The story is centered on the Mothers' Union of a small town in Devon, England, to where Esther, her husband, and her daughter have recently moved. Esther is an American who wants to be accepted in Devon at the same time she is somehow an outsider: she sees herself as different from the other female residents, but she tries to become one of them.<sup>3</sup>

*The Bell Jar* and "Mothers" portray dissonant relationships between women and ambivalent positions in relation to language. Many female characters—including the protagonists—have their present-time situations defined by their statuses as mothers. Whereas in *The Bell Jar* young Esther is struggling to appropriate a language of her own, in "Mothers" the other Esther lacks interest in writing altogether. In what follows, I analyze both narratives in terms of female relationships, motherhood, and loss of language,

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3. Plath and Hughes lived in Devon as well: they moved to Court Green on August 31, 1961 (Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*). Although Plath's journals of the time were destroyed—or simply disappeared, there are still uncertainties—a compilation of notes on Plath's Devon neighbors was published as "Appendix 15" in her journals (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 630-674). David Trinidad speculates that "Mothers" could be a fictionalization of missing journal entries, as well as Plath's only known story that might have resulted from the sketches she wrote of her neighbors (135-136).

discussions that are grounded in the works of French philosopher Luce Irigaray. I see a lack of sorority in the female spaces presented in both *The Bell Jar* and "Mothers": in the two works, female characters are reduced to the functions of mother and wife, and they end up reinforcing patriarchal values. Furthermore, I argue that the two main characters named "Esther" have more in common than just their names, and I investigate evidence that shows that this might be more than just a coincidence. By juxtaposing *The Bell Jar*'s Esther's anxieties about writing as a woman and the fact that she is the first-person narrator of her story to the reductive role of typist of one's husband's writings presented in the third-person narrative "Mothers," I propose that the Esther from the short story might be seen as a final figure of a loss of language originated in the novel. Finally, I claim that, by depicting this loss, Plath is providing a critique, which I approximate to Irigaray's notion of mimesis.

## FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS AND MOTHERHOOD

"Mothers" opens with an irritated Esther getting ready to go to that month's Mothers' Union with Rose. The latter introduces Esther to Mrs. Nolan, a mother that also knows no one in town, in spite of being there for six years. As the narrator puts it, "[i]f Mrs. Nolan, an Englishwoman by her looks and accent,

and a pub-keeper's wife as well, felt herself a stranger in Devon after six years, what hope had Esther, an American, of infiltrating that rooted society ever at all?" (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 12). Through the narrator's free indirect speech, the reader comes to know Esther's uneasiness about the possibilities of her acceptance in Devon: it might be even more difficult than she previously had in mind. This passage shows how, as an American, she is unable to read this English community's social rules. Tracy Brain mentions that Esther does not notice reasons that might cause Mrs. Nolan's exclusion such as the "possible Irishness" of her name or her working-class status as the wife of a pub-keeper, which Esther sees as an attribute (64). Despite the story's third-person narrator, it is Esther's perception, as an outsider, that prevails in "Mothers." She feels uneasy in this community with whose traditions she is not acquainted.

Nevertheless, even though she keeps a distance from the townspeople, Esther wants to belong in Devon. For Linda Wagner-Martin, she cannot decide if she wants to know the townspeople or not (*Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* 71). During service at church, Rose kneels, while Esther and Mrs. Nolan do not: the two also confess to each other that they almost never go to church (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 13). This is, however, inaccurate in Esther's case: she sees the church as a

way to integrate. We come to know that she has previously been an assiduous frequenter of Evensong, despite being brought up a Unitarian and having once “swallow[ed] an impulse” to tell the rector that she was an atheist (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 14). Thus, although she identifies with Mrs. Nolan’s outsider perspective in relation to the community, she is apparently striving to be part of it. Her will to belong in Devon also seems to be stronger than her current views on religion—her atheism or agnosticism.

During the meeting, Esther learns that not all mothers are accepted in the Mothers’ Union. The rector’s wife makes a speech supposedly welcoming Esther and Mrs. Nolan, saying that she hopes they will become members of the Union. The rector nods at Esther, “as if they had already had a great deal to say to each other” (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 19). It is clear that Esther will be allowed to become part of the community of churchgoers: in spite of being neither Anglican nor English, she is welcome at his church. But this is not the case for Mrs. Nolan; the rector subtly tells her that she does not belong there:

“I’m sorry, but the reason I’ve not called is because I thought you were a divorcee. I usually make it a point not to bother them.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter now, does it,”

muttered the blushing Mrs. Nolan, tugging furiously at the collar of her open coat. The rector finished with some little welcoming homily which escaped Esther, so confused and outraged was she by Mrs. Nolan’s predicament.

“I shouldn’t have come,” Mrs. Nolan whispered to Esther. “Divorced women aren’t supposed to come.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Esther said. “I’m going. Let’s go now.” (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 19)

Despite his wife’s welcoming speech, it is the rector who gets to decide who is welcome at his church. An apparent female space, the Mothers’ Union is coordinated by a man.

The subject position in “Mothers” can be said to be masculine. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray argues that the subject is always masculine: in what she sees as a masculinist economy, women function as projections of men, either objectified or reobjectified (133). Without a subjectivity of their own, they are objectified, and, if they try to speak in male terms, they are reobjectified. In “Mothers,” even if there is a Mothers’ Union meeting, an event supposedly organized by and for mothers, it displays the patriarchal mentality of the Church of England through the careful eye of the male rector: only women who

behave according to what is expected of them are able to join this community. Women receive the status of an object: if they attempt to behave differently, they will be excluded, like Mrs. Nolan. She is evidence that this is not a place for women, but for women who behave according to the patriarchal conventions assigned to them; otherwise, they are seen as pariahs. For Irigaray, it is through language, by saying what a woman is or is not, that she might have to conform to that definition, to the ontological status assigned to her (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 163).<sup>4</sup> The rector makes this clear, although subtly, when he approaches Mrs. Nolan: he makes her aware that he knows she is divorced. Therefore, being a "divorcee" becomes all she is, and it does not matter if she has other attributes: she will not be tolerated at his church.

The last scene of the story might be described as Mrs. Nolan's final exclusion. After the incident with the rector, the three women leave the meeting. At a certain point, Mrs. Nolan parts from the other two and follows her

way home. Rose and Esther comment on her case:

"I didn't know they didn't allow divorcees," Esther said.

"Oh, no, they don't like 'em. ... Mrs. Hotchkiss said that even if Mrs. Nolan wanted to join the Mothers' Union, she couldn't." (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 20)

They change the subject and keep walking together: "Rose crooked out one arm, and Esther, without hesitation, took it" (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 20). By taking Rose's arm, Esther becomes an accomplice of Mrs. Nolan's exclusion: in spite of being outraged at the fact that divorced women are not allowed there and of sympathizing with Mrs. Nolan, she wants a place in the community, and Rose is able to guide her through this process since she is one of the accepted mothers. As Jo Gill argues, Esther's "initiation into this world comes with her apparent betrayal, or sacrifice, of Mrs. Nolan" (90-91). Throughout the story, the two women seem to have a connection; they might have been friends outside the Mothers' Union, and maybe they would create a real bond. Yet, even though during tea they peer at each other, "like schoolgirls with a secret" (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 17), when Esther is going home with Rose, she does not hesitate in taking her arm. In fact, Esther

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4. As Irigaray puts it, woman is appropriated to an end, and she has to be certified as something by a certain logos in order to be. In this sense, even though she is a full being without the necessity of this definition, she is not taken as such unless logocentric discourse—which Irigaray sees as masculine—affirms that she is (see Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 162-163).

is able to attend church without being a believer and to accept injustice for the sake of feeling as *if* she belonged—for we can question whether she *really* belongs in such a context. Mrs. Nolan is “the obvious scapegoat. But Esther, too, is an outsider” (Gill 90). She knows that her place in the community, as an American, must be conquered; that it is not guaranteed.

One might wonder whether it is possible for women to create real bonds in such contexts; not only in “Mothers,” but also in *The Bell Jar*, it seems rather unlikely. Irigaray believes that sororities would come from women’s groups; she sees them as another form of love between women, which would be important for them not to be servants of phallocratism, for enabling them to be something other than rivals and objects (*Le corps-à-corps avec la mère* 61, 31). Although there are female spaces in *The Bell Jar* and “Mothers,” there are no propositions of sororities in the narratives. The novel is almost entirely focused on women’s groups: the group of girls that goes to New York, the female college to where Esther goes, and the female mental hospital where she is interned. Yet, Esther apparently traces a path for herself that does not allow her to create bonds with no other woman but Doctor Nolan. While in New York, she apparently makes friends, but her opinions on them constantly change. She identifies with Betsy to a certain point, but, when she gets tired

of her, she mocks her with Doreen. One night, Esther and Doreen end up going to a man’s apartment, Doreen’s love interest. Despite the latter’s request that Esther stays in case “he trie[s] anything funny,” Esther goes back to the hotel and decides that she will nothing to do with Doreen anymore (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 15, 22). When it comes to women that are sexually or racially different, Esther puts herself even more at a distance. She denies the lesbian possibility vehemently: when Joan tells her that she likes her, Esther acts as if the other were repulsive (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 220).

Regarding older women, they seem to work for the maintenance of a patriarchy in *The Bell Jar*. As Irigaray puts it, in a phallocratic economy, women do not exist for themselves, but as reflections of the one (the masculine subject), and they do not notice that they are part of this economy, for they have been living according to it all their lives (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 135, 136). In one of *The Bell Jar*’s most famous passages, Esther analyzes the outcomes her life might have by comparing them to a fig tree: each of its branches offers a possibility based on a certain female model (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 77). Esther ends up questioning the influence that “weird old women” claim to have over her: “they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 220). Each of

these women presents characteristics with which Esther is not willing to cope: they are either too professional, the 1950s stereotype of the career woman, such as Jay Cee, or examples of domesticity, like Mrs. Willard. Wagner-Martin calls attention to how “these hovering and seemingly well-intentioned older women ... reconfirm the teaching of [the] patriarchy” (*The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* 54). It is interesting that it is among women that Esther finds the most ardent defenses of marriage, chastity, and domesticity—Mrs. Willard, mother of Esther’s boyfriend, being their greatest advocate. According to her, woman is defined in relation to man, the protagonist of human life: “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 72). Mrs. Willard has been interpreted as a “spokesperson for the dominant 1950s gender ideology” (Wagner-Martin, *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* 33). She has given up her job to be a full-time housewife, to make house utilities to which no one pays attention, such as a kitchen mat that Esther compares to married women: like the mat, they also ended up flattened out underneath their husbands’ feet (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 84-85).

Likewise, in “Mothers,” even if the Mothers’ Union is supposedly a female space, other women do nothing to prevent Mrs. Nolan’s exclusion and

hence they comply with it; to be accepted, they become part of a discourse that denies and excludes women who do not behave according to the rules. Consequently, the mothers in the Union end up working as agents of the patriarchy as well; they might not sound as emphatic as Mrs. Willard, but it might be because, in Devon, social norms work more subtly: no one utters them as clearly as in the suburbs of Boston. Not only are the women in the Union working in favor of a patriarchy, they are also hypocrites, especially the rector’s wife: “even though she has verbally asked the two women to join, social forms and religious codes let everyone know that Mrs. Nolan cannot join. What Esther has experienced ... is their flagrant hypocrisy” (Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* 72). The rector’s wife plays the role of the welcoming host despite knowing beforehand that Mrs. Nolan will be rejected. Yet, even if Esther learns about these women’s hypocrisy, she is apparently succumbing to it. According to Wagner-Martin, “she seems to commit herself to joining the group, and to behaving toward divorced women just as the Mothers’ Union members do” (*Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* 71). We cannot be sure whether Esther would indeed behave “just as” the other mothers do towards divorced women, but she has apparently taken the first step in that direction.



By becoming part of the Mothers' Union, like the other accepted mothers, Esther's identity might be said to be reduced to that of a function, a role that *The Bell Jar's* young Esther vehemently denies for herself. In a phallocratic context, Irigaray argues, women are only seen as "nature"; they are relegated to pleasuring man and being procreators; they end up being reduced to a function, to being mothers, and nothing more (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 166, *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère* 86). In *The Bell Jar*, the young Esther cannot identify with her mother. Although Mrs. Greenwood works, she does not do it for personal fulfilment but to support her children, and she ends up being consumed by motherhood.<sup>5</sup> In spite of not being sure about what she wants for her life, Esther knows that she does not want to be like her mother, who has worked with shorthand: she is more inclined towards being a writer, towards attempting to have a name, an identity of her own. In "Mothers," everything is centered on motherhood: if there is a women's meeting, it is only because they are

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5. The greatest example of consumption by motherhood in the novel is that of Esther's neighbor Dodo Conway, who "raised her six children—and would no doubt raise her seventh" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 116). Esther describes her as "[a] woman ... with a grotesque, protruding stomach" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 116). It has been argued that women are depicted as dehumanized after pregnancy in *The Bell Jar* (Wagner-Martin, *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* 86).

mothers—and only those who have never been divorced are "acceptable" mothers enough to attend it. Besides her outsider perspective, we do not know much about Esther, just that she has a child and is pregnant again; it is difficult to grasp an identity for this character beyond that of a mother. During the meeting, at church, Esther feels her baby kick and thinks to herself: "I am a mother; I belong here" (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 15). Being a mother is enough for creating a sense of belonging, as if it were all it took for these women to define themselves and for them to identify with each other. This reduction puts aside the differences between mothers, their individual identities. As Irigaray mentions, women have to renounce their female identities to enter the between-men cultural world (*je, tu, nous* 21). By defining herself only as a mother, Esther secures her place in the between-men world, in which she serves as a procreator and lacks a female identity of her own. If we think about *The Bell Jar*, if we recall Esther's present-time situation, all we know about her is that she is a mother as well—that she has given an old gift for "the baby to play with" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 3).<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, both characters

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6. This is the only reference in the novel to Esther's present-time situation. Although she is already an adult when she narrates the experiences of her youth, she writes them through her younger self's perception; it is as if there were no distance between her past and

called Esther seem to have their present situations defined by motherhood, a similarity in which I ground my following discussion on the conceptions and uses of language in these two fictional works.

## A FINAL LOSS OF LANGUAGE

In 1962, when "Mothers" was written, *The Bell Jar* had already been accepted for publication, and the name of its protagonist had already been changed to "Esther." There were different drafts of *The Bell Jar* before its final version, and its heroine's name changed a few times. In an early draft not prior to 1961, she was called "Frieda" (see Plath, *The Bell Jar*: early draft); in a second draft, both the character's name and the novel's pseudonym were changed from "Frieda Lucas" to "Victoria Lucas" (see Plath, *The Bell Jar*: second draft). Plath submitted the novel's manuscript with its heroine named Victoria Lucas, which she had to change due to her editor's demand that the pen-name was not the same as the main character's; she agreed to it and requested its change to Esther Greenwood (see Plath, letter to James Michie, November 14, 1961). Hence, when Plath named the main character of "Mothers," she knew it would match the name of the protagonist of her novel. As I will now discuss, according to what is known about Plath's later fiction, this decision might have been intentional.

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her present selves, and therefore not much of the latter is disclosed.

The repetition of names is not uncommon in Plath's narrative. Concerning *The Bell Jar* and the stories published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a few examples of repeated first and last names follow: Agnes ("The Whishing Box," "All the Dead Dears," and "The Day Mr. Prescott Died"), Betsy ("Initiation" and *The Bell Jar*), Cora ("The Daughters of Blossom Street" and "All the Dead Dears"), Ellen ("Day of Success," "Tongues of Stone," and "All the Dead Dears"), Millicent ("Sweet Pie and the Gutter Men" and "Initiation"), Minnie ("The Daughters of Blossom Street" and "All the Dead Dears"), Myra ("Sweet Pie and the Gutter Men," "All the Dead Dears," and "The Day Mr. Prescott Died"), Sadie ("The Shadow" and "The Fifty-Ninth Bear"), Miss Taylor and Billy ("The Daughters of Blossom Street" and "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"), Greenwood ("All the Dead Dears" and *The Bell Jar*), Guinea (*The Bell Jar* and "Stone Boy with Dolphin"), and Tomolillo ("The Daughters of Blossom Street," "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle," and *The Bell Jar*). If we consider Plath's manuscripts, there are even more repetitions. Ferretter discusses stories held at the Lilly Library: two of them, "Platinum Summer" and "The Smoky Blue Piano," have characters named Lynn, and in "The Matisse Chapel," there is another character named Sadie (*Sylvia Plath's Fiction*). Moreover, Plath had the intention to

name the heroine of her novel *Falcon Yard* "Dody Ventura" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 311), which ended up being the protagonist of the story "Stone Boy with Dolphin," the latter being a fragment of the novel. Plath later changed the name of *Falcon Yard*'s main character to Sadie (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 498), which would also be the name of the protagonist of "The Fifty-Ninth Bear." Even though her name choices seem rather random, there are possible associations of meaning between characters with the same—or similar—names. Andrew Wilson, for instance, sees the last name "Minton" appearing in stories with related themes (72-73).

However, despite the frequent repetition of names in Plath's narrative, "Esther" seems to have had a special importance to her. Ferretter comments on the 1948 story "The Visitor": Esther is the visitor, "a college friend of the narrator's mother, who has chosen a career rather than marriage" (*Sylvia Plath's Fiction*). In addition to this story, written before Plath entered Smith College, "Esther" appears in "All the Dead Deers," but as a minor character, not as one of Plath's alter egos. In *The Bell Jar* and "Mothers," Esther works as an alter ego, and, given the importance of both works, as I will comment, she might be taken as Plath's main alter ego.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Esther is the name of

a Jewish queen is of particular interest here. Plath identified with Jewish people and Jewish beliefs; according to friend Janet Salter, "if we [she and Plath] were ever in a situation where we didn't want people to know we were referring to ourselves, we would use biblical names—I would call myself Ruth, and Sylvia liked to use Esther" (qtd. in Wilson 290). Maybe it is not a coincidence that she ended up choosing Esther for more than one text. According to Kendall, "Plath, unquestionably, aspires to Jewishness"; he mentions that "[w]hat appeals to her about the Jewish faith in the twentieth century is its confirmation through suffering" (54). In "Mothers," when the rector tells Esther that it is not a problem that she was brought up a Unitarian as long as she is a Christian who believes in the "efficacy of prayer," she is not able to tell him how, after Comparative Religion classes at college,

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of Doctor/Mrs. "Nolan" as someone with whom both Esthers sympathize is also of interest. In the novel, Doctor Nolan is a mother figure, under whose supervision Esther is finally able to undergo her treatment. Esther does not see any woman as an adequate role model until she meets the psychiatrist. Differently from other women that Esther knows, Doctor Nolan has a life of her own that is not consumed by motherhood, and, unlike Mrs. Greenwood, she seems to listen to Esther's needs. For Wagner-Martin, Doctor Nolan "gains force as the only strong yet humane woman character in the novel because her role regarding Esther is to empower her" (*The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* 59). In "Mothers," Mrs. Nolan is an outsider, like Esther.

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7. "Esther" is not the only name that appears in both *The Bell Jar* and "Mothers": the repetition

she “ended up sorry she was not a Jew” (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 14).

Scholars have hinted at a possible connection between the two Esthers, and the fact that “Mothers” was written to be a segment of a novel works in favor of this claim. Brain speculates that “Mothers” “may offer us another glimpse of Esther Greenwood, years after the events of *The Bell Jar*” (64). In this direction, David Trinidad comments on a note made by Plath’s mother on the printed version of “Mothers”: “Aurelia Plath’s marginalia ... informs us that ‘Mothers’ was originally intended as a segment of what would have been the unfinished novel *Doubletake*. If Aurelia is correct, the short story may be the only fragment we’ll ever have of the missing novel” (136). This printed version, held at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, is now too fragile to copy; nonetheless, according to its description, it includes a typed label on the front cover that indicates that the story would be the segment of a third book if Plath had not burned the second book (Mortimer Rare Book Room, *Guide to the Sylvia Plath Collection* 124). *Doubletake*—also called *Double Exposure*—was the last of Plath’s novels, left unfinished when she died. In a November 20, 1962 letter, Plath explains that *Doubletake* would be a semi-autobiographical novel about a wife who finds out what her husband is really like, which differs from what she

previously thought of him (see Plath, letter to Olive Higgins Prouty, November 20, 1962). What happened with the manuscript after Plath’s death is still unresolved. In the introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Ted Hughes mentions that Plath “wrote some 130 pages of another novel, provisionally titled *Double Exposure*,” a manuscript that “disappeared somewhere around 1970” (1). In a 1995 interview, he comments that Plath’s mother saw “a whole novel,” about which he “never knew”: “What I was aware of was sixty, seventy pages that disappeared. And to tell you the truth, I always assumed her mother took them all on one of her visits” (qtd. in Heinz, “Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry No. 71”). Whether there were 130 or 60 pages, or if Plath’s mother really did keep the novel’s manuscript, it is still uncertain. While we do not have access to this manuscript—which might never happen—all we can do is analyze the information available, which points to a connection between “Mothers” and *Doubletake*.

I therefore accept the idea that “Mothers” provides a “glimpse” of *The Bell Jar*’s Esther in the future, and I propose that “Mothers” works as *The Bell Jar*’s afterword. As I have mentioned, the two Esthers have common characteristics beyond their names: in *The Bell Jar*, little is known about the adult Esther other than the fact that she has a baby; in “Mothers”

Esther has a child and is again pregnant. The story might have really worked as part of another novel telling the following events in the life of *The Bell Jar's* protagonist; however, as this last novel was never finished, "Mothers" functions as *The Bell Jar's* afterword. Plath intended *Falcon Yard's* chapters to work separately, like stories (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 311), and this might have been the case of *Doubletake* as well.

*The Bell Jar* and "Mothers" provide antithetical views on language, both thematically—in the discussions they present on language—and formally—in how they use language. In the novel, Esther strongly criticizes the hypocrisy of gender norms, especially how her writing goals are seen as incompatible with being female. She sees writing as her realm, and being a writer is one of the possibilities that she imagines for her future. Mrs. Greenwood wants Esther to learn shorthand, a practical skill, but the latter refuses it: "I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 76). Learning shorthand would be a way to conform to the fact that she would have to serve men by accepting what she perceives as a lower occupation, a career that would be only complementary to that of a future husband. Esther initially sees literature as her—feminine—field in opposition to her boyfriend's—

masculine—science.<sup>8</sup> Buddy eventually tells Esther that after she were a married mother she would not want to write poetry anymore, and she concludes that "when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 85). Trying to speak in male terms is the same as not having voice: Esther cannot simply appropriate the masculinist economy and do the same, because her ambitions are limited to her being female. In spite of her capacity to write, male poets would always be poets, even after marriage, but she would be somehow "brainwashed" to give up writing. The apparent impossibility of conciliating the roles of wife, mother, and writer in her context leads Esther no option but to deny marriage altogether: she eventually tells Buddy that she is "never going to get married" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 93). Her breakdown is mainly centered on how she can no longer use language: an English major with writing skills, she suddenly cannot read nor write. Esther's relationship to language is of great importance, and for her to

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8. Buddy, a medical student, dominates a scientific language that Esther does not; when they start dating, she feels intellectually inferior due to his scientific knowledge: "He was a couple of years older than I was and very scientific, so he could always prove things. When I was with him I had to work to keep my head above water" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 56). Buddy initially despises poetry; he even says that a poem is "[a] piece of dust" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 56), which reinforces Esther's gendered views on literature and science.

get better is to regain her previous interest in words.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of *The Bell Jar*, when Esther is ready to leave the hospital, her capacities to read and write seem to be coming back. We know that she eventually goes back to writing since the adult, mother Esther is the narrator of the novel; after some time, she is able to write about her breakdown. Wagner-Martin comments that it is “reassuring [that] Esther has married and has a child” (*The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* 61); one might, however, wonder whether getting married has really been reassuring for Esther since it was precisely what she did not want to do with her life when she was younger. Has she assimilated into the world that so vehemently criticized before? Maybe she has changed her mind, but, due to the novel’s open ending, one can only suppose. Plath actually considered giving a coda to *The Bell Jar*, as it is schematized in her planning of it (*The Bell Jar*: outline of chapters), but it was not included in its final, published version. Had this coda been written, would it present a similar situation to the one depicted in “Mothers”?

Arguably, *The Bell Jar*’s Esther finishes the narrative by accepting to live in the

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9. Esther’s high-school English teacher tries to help her “revive [her] old interest in words” by visiting her at the hospital and trying to teach her how to play Scrabble (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 202).

male world she refused before, and the story’s Esther assimilates into an even more conservative society, centered on the Church of England. Besides identifying as a mother, the latter Esther defines herself as a wife, who serves her husband’s work rather than her own. When Mrs. Nolan asks what she does in Devon, Esther answers: “Oh, I have the baby. ... I type some of my husband’s work” (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 16). Unlike the first-person *The Bell Jar*, whose Esther wants to write her own words when younger and narrates her breakdown when older, “Mothers” has a third-person narrator, and thus this Esther does not even tell her own story. Whereas, in *The Bell Jar*, young Esther strongly opposes learning shorthand because she does not want to type men’s letters but her own, in “Mothers,” Esther is confined to typing her husband’s writings. Not only does this story depict women as mothers, as nature, it also portrays men as reason, as logos: Esther does the mechanical work of typing her husband’s words, whereas he is the reasonable subject who writes them.

If we analyze “Mothers” as *The Bell Jar*’s afterword, we might say that the story figures a final loss of language, whose origin is depicted in the novel. Irigaray’s proposition that the feminine is a nonexistent reality in a masculine language is significant to this argument (*je, tu, nous* 20). One might argue that the story’s Esther succumbs to being

part of a masculine discourse that denies her even as an other—a discourse that denies her pleasure, to put it in Irigarayan terms.<sup>10</sup> When young, *The Bell Jar*'s Esther loses and apparently regains her connection to words; she later writes about what happened in her memoirs, but only to lose her dominion of language again in "Mothers" by being reduced to the function that terrorized her when young: that of a mother. Esther is defined as one of the Union mothers; she has a child and is pregnant again, and she spends her time in Devon typing her husband's writings. We know little about her: she questions her faith and is sympathetic towards Mrs. Nolan's situation, but she ends up being like the other women; she accepts her role as wife and mother, without ambitions of her own. Whereas in *The Bell Jar* the young Esther bragged about being "an observer" (Plath, *The Bell Jar* 105), in "Mothers" the protagonist does not want to remain an outsider; she wants to be accepted, even if the price is her submission to a discourse with which she disagrees.

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10. In the current state of her time, Irigaray saw a "self-representation of phallic desire in discourse"; in this context, "[f]eminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure" (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 77).

The analysis of Plathian later narrative seems to point to a movement towards the acceptance of Plath's previous concerns as a woman, while she is also critiquing this acceptance. *The Bell Jar* shows a young woman enraged by the hypocrisy of gender norms, and Sadie from the 1959 "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" uncannily avenges herself from her husband, who sees her as a mere fragile creature.<sup>11</sup> In "Mothers," the protagonist seems willing to pay the price of social acceptance, even it means complying with a conservative position towards women. These propositions might change if we had access to everything Plath wrote with *Doubletake* in mind: since the novel's objective was to depict a woman who was betrayed, its voice could have been similar to that of her *Ariel* poems,<sup>12</sup>

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11. "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" tells the story of a couple that is evidently in discord. Norton sees Sadie as fragile, and, since the reader only has access to his perceptions, at least initially, the way Sadie feels is unknown. At the end of the narrative, while trying to move a bear away from their car, Norton is killed by the animal, who was apparently summoned by Sadie. It was the fifty-ninth bear they counted while camping, the number being Sadie's "symbol of plenitude" (Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 109).

12. The *Ariel* poems are generally seen as presenting a more aggressive—and sometimes even vengeful—voice in relation to Plath's earlier poetry published in *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Steven Gould Axelrod and Nan Dorsey see a movement from evoking "the ghost in language" to confronting him directly (79).

which she was writing at the same time, or maybe to that of *The Bell Jar*'s young Esther. Still, we can only speculate about the remains of this novel, and what "Mothers" depicts is a woman without a voice, typing words that are not her own. Is it a critique? By depicting the apparent inevitability of this scenario, Plath is somehow critiquing it. Maybe it functions like Irigaray's mimesis, which consists in a woman's denial to be exploited by discourse by submitting to this precise discourse in a way that the exploitation is made visible because of her excessive submission (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 76). This strategy would be a way to call attention, through mimicry, to how masculinist discourse relegates woman to a subaltern position by exaggerating her subalternity.<sup>13</sup> Analogously, by submitting a character to a patriarchal, exclusionary community in which she is only a wife and mother, Plath exposes the hypocrisy of gender norms in a new scenario. Although less enthusiastic than *The Bell Jar*, "Mothers" also aims at social critique.

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13. In Irigaray's words, "[t]o play with mimesis is ..., for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible,' of 'matter'—to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 76).



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# “And I a smiling woman.”

## Sylvia Plath’s Unheimlich Domesticity

by Candice L Wuehle

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Doppelgänger, living dolls, monstered speakers, and alien landscapes populate the corpus of Sylvia Plath’s writing from her juvenilia to her posthumously published *Ariel* poems.<sup>1</sup> It is apparent from the poet’s undergraduate thesis, “The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoyevsky’s Novels,” that Plath was absorbed by the psychoanalytic underpinnings from which the concept of the uncanny was birthed.<sup>2</sup> In her thesis, Plath argues that Dostoyevsky’s characters have “attempted to exclude some vital part of their personalities in

hopes of recovering their integrity. This simple solution, however, is a false one, for the repressed characteristics return to haunt them in the form of their Doubles” (Coyne). Plath’s articulation of “repressed characteristics” is certainly informed by Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay, “The Uncanny,” in which Freud analyzes E.T.A. Hoffman’s short story “The Sandman” in order, ultimately, to argue that a “return of the repressed” is at the root of uncanny affects.

Significantly, the Germanic origin of the adjective “uncanny” (“unheimlich”) springs forth from the space of the domestic, ergo, the domain of the feminine. Likewise, Plath’s use of uncanny affects functions as a tool the poet frequently employs to interrogate cultural constructs regarding “femininity,” particularly in relation to the domestic sphere, motherhood, and objectification of the female body. While Plath was already a well-known figure throughout the English literary scene due to appearances on the BBC and in various publications, Frances McCullough argues that the poet reached cross-continental renown in the years between the posthumous publication of *Ariel* in 1964 and

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Gill offers a comprehensive overview of the manner in which Plath’s treatment of themes regarding “the process of transformation, translocation and even dislocation” (43) develop throughout the poet’s career. Gill considers representations of both natural and artificial environments, ranging from physical transformation to alien dislocation beginning in Plath’s juvenilia and ending with her posthumous *Ariel* poems. Likewise, Mary Lynn Broe provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of subjectivity in Plath’s early and mid-career poetry that considers the fragmentary nature Plath’s speaker’s psyche.

<sup>2</sup> “The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoyevsky’s Novels” was submitted as a component of Plath’s Special Honors in English at Smith College in 1955.

American publication of *The Bell Jar* in 1971 due to the influence of the Woman's Movement, which politicized the contents of Plath's work written in an era that was "pre-drugs, pre-Pill, pre-Women's studies" (9). Plath biographers Anne Stevenson and Linda Wagner-Martin agree with McCullough's reading; Stevenson claims Plath as "a heroine and martyr of the Woman's Movement" (*Two Views of Plath* 1994) while Wagner-Martin states, "Like Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*" Plath's *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* were "both a harbinger and an early voice of the Woman's Movement" (*Two Views of Plath* 1995). However, in spite of Plath's unique significance to first wave feminists, little attention to the manner in which the poet persistently frames issues central to the Women's Movement as uncanny have been considered.<sup>3</sup> Several scholars, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Plath biographer Frances McCullough argues that the poet reached cross-continental renown in the years between the publication of *Ariel* in 1964 and *The Bell Jar* in 1971 due to the influence of the Woman's Movement, which politicized the contents of Plath's work written in an era that was "pre-drugs, pre-Pill, pre-Women's studies" (9). Anne Stevenson and Linda Wagner-Martin concur with McCullough's reading; Stevenson claims Plath as "a heroine and martyr of the Woman's Movement" (*Two Views of Plath* 1994) while Wagner-Martin states, "Like Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*," Plath's *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* were "both a harbinger and an early voice of the Woman's Movement" (*Two Views of Plath* 1995).

Kelly Marie Coyne, in her recent article, "*The Magic Mirror*": *Uncanny Suicides*, from Sylvia Plath to Chantal Ackerman and Judith Kroll in her 1978 biography, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, have examined Plath's work through the lens of the uncanny. Indeed, these critics also take their point of departure from Plath's undergraduate thesis, however, they do not expand their analysis of her work beyond the concept of the "double" or "döppelgänger" to consider the many other aspects of the Freudian uncanny present in her poetry. Coyne offers an interesting analysis of the double from a queer studies perspective, ultimately arguing that, "Plath—in doubling on both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of [her] work—propose[s] a queer liminal space that siphons and ultimately expels repressed uncanny desire, allowing for both self-sustainability and personal integrity" (1). My own reading of the Plathian uncanny (specifically in relation to the döppelgänger) orients itself first from Luce Irigaray's conceptualization of the döppelgänger: "Within herself," Irigaray argues, "she is already two—but not divisible into ones" because female desire "does not speak the same" singular "language as male desire." Rather, it is "diversified" and "multiple" (100). Like Irigaray, my reading insists that to express female desire is always to speak the language of the uncanny, therefore, not even a "queer liminal space" possesses the ability to "expel

uncanny desire”; rather, to speak of female desire and the female experience is to always be speaking in the mode of the uncanny. Plath’s depictions of motherhood, domestic labor, and media representations of femininity as uncanny, monstrous, alien, and otherwise “creepy,” therefore, provides crucial insight into both the poetics of Sylvia Plath as well as the manner in which Plath’s use of the uncanny comes to serve as a synecdoche of a much larger cultural discourse.

Via an etymological investigation regarding that which constitutes the homelike (“Heimlich”) as “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely, etc.” (2), Freud locates the home at the center of the unfamiliar, stating, “The word Heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich. What is Heimlich thus comes to be unheimlich” (3). The Freudian uncanny is thus the familiar, which has been estranged through repeated repression. What I have termed “the Plathian uncanny” manifests itself as a return to the (quite actual) home, whose constraints Plath’s speakers wish to outright reject, but are compelled by cultural forces, legal restraints, and/or historic precedent, to repress. In “The Applicant,” for example, Plath presents a furious satire of a job interview:

*First, are you our type of person?*

*Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a  
crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber  
crotch,*

*Stitches to show something’s  
missing?... (1-6)*

In these lines, Plath presents the gaze of the (male) interviewer as one which views the “ideal” woman (“our type of person”) as incomplete and inherently repressed. This repression generates an uncanny mode (as displayed quite literally by Plath as a body outfitted with artificial parts) that presents the domesticated female body as a site of contested cultural and psychological memory. In “The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” Kathleen Margaret Lant emphasizes the extreme power the female body poses in Plath’s poetry, arguing that the poet’s frequent recourse to bodily imagery “...reveal[s] Plath’s conviction that undressing has become for her a powerful poetic gesture, and in these poems it is the female speaker who finally disrobes—and here she attempts to appropriate the power of nakedness for herself” (630). Lant further elucidates the connection between power and subjectivity, adding, “Plath does not simply contemplate from the spectator’s point of view the horrors and the vigor of the act of undressing; now her female

subject dares to make herself naked, and she does so in an attempt to make herself mighty" (630). It is significant, then, that the "mighty" power of uncanny representations in Plath's late poetry are often generated by transformations and confluences of the speaker's body with cultural or historical artifacts; in "The Other," the speaker's own blood becomes "an effect, a cosmetic" (line 30) while the speaker's body in "Fever 103°" boldly transitions into "a pure acetylene/ Virgin" (46-47).<sup>4</sup> In this way, the body itself becomes an unheimlich vessel which functions to question, contest, and, ultimately, protest normative ideals regarding female subjectivity.

This essay will begin by considering the poetry and prose of Sylvia Plath from a Kristevian perspective in order to illuminate the manner in which Plath confronts and destabilizes the "borders" which confine the domestic space and domesticized body. A close reading of "Lady Lazarus" will examine the way in which Plath constructs a speaker who performs this destabilization by weaponizing the abject via a repetition compulsion which

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, Marilyn Boyer considers the body in "The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" by utilizing a mixture of feminist and disability studies (with an emphasis on theories provided by Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan) in order to examine "The mind/body connection, or more pointedly, its dis-connection" (199) in *The Bell Jar*.

emerges and replays a repressed past. Through further consideration of Lady Lazarus as an uncanny actor who replays a past appropriated from other tragedies (i.e., the Holocaust and the Lazarus Myth), I argue that Plath emphasizes gender differences in the act of remembering in order to perform the uncanny and give voice to the silenced, or, abjected.

## Plath's Unhomelike Home

The Heimlich/unheimlich distinction applies even more pointedly to the "home" of the female body itself. Plath's female "I"/eye is much like Hoffman's monstrous "Sandman" who is "without eyes" and instead is possessed of "ghastly, deep, black cavities instead" (90).<sup>5</sup> Plath's speaker both experiences the world as uncanny and is herself an uncanny actor within it. This generates a doubled sense of disease in Plath's work; because the speaker is often a "living doll" ("The Applicant"); a "little toy wife" ("Amnesiac"); or a collection of assembled, inanimate parts, "My head a moon/ Of Japanese paper" ("Fever 103°") who witnesses the world as a series of events rife with uncanny atmosphere, the rhetorical situation in which these poems exist is itself disembodied.

Even more troubling, however, is the implication that the female body is

never "whole" in terms of consciousness or corporeality. Rather, it functions as a liminal site at which the real and the unreal not only meet, but merge. This merger situates the Plathian body as neither a subject nor an object, but rather as a Kristevian abject who/which, "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 10). A resistance to a patriarchal symbolic order that attempts to position the speaker as only a mother, wife, or sexual object generates much of Plath's uncanny tension. Liz Yorke also analyzes Plath's work from the lens of French feminist thought in *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry* to argue that what is shocking in Plath's work is her readiness to "enter into the fields of semantic danger of her own rage, anguish, and desire" (37). In other words, Plath's speakers demonstrate symbolic and semantic risk via utterances that serve to 1.) Position the reader as the audience of an uncanny experience in which the concept of "femininity" is made uncanny due to a sense of "intellectual uncertainty" (*The Uncanny* 7) and disease. This gesture forces the reader to consider female experience as inherently othered. The speaker is thus situated in a liminal space in which she recognizes that which is her own (her Heimlich body in its sexual and

maternal capacity) yet is simultaneously made unrecognizable via the utterance that makes the body unrecognizable to itself (a toy, a corpse, a living doll). This gesture resonates with Kristeva's assertion that the abject marks the moment of individual psychosexual development when the self is separated from the mother in order to distinguish a boundary between "me" and "(m)other" (Felluga 3). Plath's uncanny representation of motherhood and the domestic space emphasize the "me" and "(m)other" in order to suggest her speaker exists in the liminal space which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4).

The stage of the unhomelike home in which much of Plath's *Ariel* era poetry takes place thus becomes the zone through which borders are stretched and interrogated. In one of the poet's final poems, "Balloons," a mother surveys her children as they play with party balloons that have "Since Christmas...lived with us." This traditionally cheerful scene takes on an alien, if not horrific, quality. The balloons have, from the poem's first stanza, been described as an animate "they" who "live" as "oval soul-animals," yet they quickly become the "queer moons we live with/ instead of dead furniture!" The balloons are, unlike the furniture, not "dead" (they seem to move of their own volition and respond to sensation by "shrieking" and "delighting"), and yet despite the



fact that they “live,” the balloons are not quite *alive*. A balloon becomes, rather, a portal to “a funny pink world” that the children “may eat on the other side of it” and the iconic scene of small children playing with red and green balloons in the days following a holiday becomes a space in which even a child can contemplate a world beyond the world they currently inhabit. Importantly, it is the very act of “living” alongside the uncanny balloons that illuminates their liminal quality and pressurizes the idea that the border space between worlds actually becomes more available the closer it exists to the known. In other words, it is because the balloons have become *Heimlich* that they *must* now also be *unheimlich*, and it is because of the conflation of their familiar status as (dead) objects of domestic celebration with their aura of humanness that they come to represent the repressed.

Plath’s work repeatedly demonstrates the transformation of the familiar to the terrifying as a response (or resistance) to the discovery of an institutionally, politically, spiritually, or culturally imposed boundary. In Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood (Plath’s fictional manifestation of herself) famously states:

*I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every*

*branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)*

This passage enacts a double-death; first, of Esther, whose indecision prevents her from eating and second, of the fruit itself, which must be eaten before they “wrinkle and go black.” For many readers, this passage simply evokes the uncertainty of youth.

However, it also serves as an excellent example of the psychic entrapment exposure to “borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4) produces in Plath’s speakers. The very familiar ideas of “a husband and a happy home and children,” becoming “a famous poet” or “brilliant professor” or “editor” or traveling the world each become terrifying because to choose one means to repress the rest and to choose none means the death not just of the self, but of the opportunity to have a self.

Plath’s later poetry, especially “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy,” accepts the impossibility of attempting to balance the unstable psychic economy displayed in Esther Greenwood’s lament. In each of these poems, Plath presents her speaker as a woman who has “made the choice” to be a wife, a daughter, or a sexual object and thus repressed her desire for other choices. This repression reemerges as a dangerous (and dangerously uncanny) protest against the very conditions that manufactured it. That which has been repressed returns as a monstered woman who has the power to destroy the borders that have abjected her; through confluences of time, bodies, identity, and the border between death and life, Plath’s speaker weaponizes her own abjection. Consider, for instance, the speaker’s address to her dead father in “Daddy”:

*At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would  
do.*

*But they pulled me out of the  
sack,  
And they stuck me together with  
glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf  
look*

*And a love of the rack and the  
screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I’m finally through.  
The black telephone’s off at the  
root,  
The voices just can’t worm  
through. (58-70)*

Once the speaker herself is disassembled and “stuck” back “together with glue” she enters the liminal/abjected space that reveals to her that she has the power to reconstruct her dead father in a shocking conflation of a Nazi/husband in lines, such as the flatly end-stopped “And then I knew what to do.” (sec. 13, line 3) The repressed father reemerges, then, in this uncanny figure, which Plath’s speaker can confront via her own uncanniness. It is the marriage (“And I said I do, I do.”) of monster (“me together with glue”) to monster (“I made a model of you”) that grants her

access to the origin ("the root"). In essence, Plath's speakers are monstered, alien, or uncanny because they are a chimera of remnants (the husband, the wife, the Nazi, the bones, and the glue) housed within a (physically and temporally) present body.

The terrifying quality of Plath's speaker is not merely that she is a zombie-like figure who eternally reemerges and replays a repressed past in order to destabilize limits, but that she replays a past which was *never known to begin with*. As in "Daddy," images, symbols and even languages that are outside Plath's own realm of psychic identity frequently emerge in order to evoke the uncanny. Critics, such as Irving Howe, Arthur Olberg, and Susan Gubar, have noted Plath's frequent recourse to Holocaust imagery and identification with Judaism is, to say the least, an odd point of identification for a white, middle-class, Unitarian-raised woman from Massachusetts. In order to further analyze how the schism between the appropriated collective memory of other races and religions and the individual and highly confessional memory of Plath's speaker functions, this essay will consider how "gender differences in the act of remembering" (Hirsch and Smith 4) that which was repressed generate a version of the uncanny that is unique to Plath. This distinctively Plathian uncanny merges the poet's own psychic sense of that

"which is familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated from the self only through the process of repression" (217) with a larger cultural psyche of whom the speaker identifies with in defiance of cultural, historical, or social borders, positions, or rules.

## (Lady) Lazarus: Cultural Memory and Gender

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith's "Feminism and Cultural Memory" provides a valuable lens through which to consider Plath's poetry in regard to the role "the female witness or agent of transmission" plays in memory construction. Hirsch and Smith expand Paul Connerton's concept of the "act of transfer" to examine the way in which "dynamics of gender and power" are manifested in cultural memories mediated through a female speaker.<sup>6</sup> Plath's persistent presentation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Hirsch and Smith define an "act of transfer" as "an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices. These transactions emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires. Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory" (5).

female speaker as a site of objectification and abjection suggests, then, that to be a woman engaged in the act of remembering is always to mediate the past through the lens of abjection that proposes a permanent slippage between the self and the other. As Arthur Oberg points out, Plath's late poems, "Daddy," and its companion piece, "Lady Lazarus," both incorporate a "movement" which "is at once historical and private; the confusion in these two spheres suggest the extent to which this century has often made it impossible to separate them" (146). Interestingly, Oberg's analysis of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" omits a consideration of the "historical and private" dichotomy present in these poems as one that is distinctly mediated via the gendered perspective of a suburban white woman. However, his observation that Plath presents these "two spheres" as inextricable suggests that Plath's speaker's consciousness of her own status as a housewife is actually quite mimetic of the blurred boundary between the real and the unreal which constitute uncanniness.

Indeed, Plath's anxiety regarding her domestic status was not unique to the poet; a mere seven days after Plath committed suicide in Primrose Hill, Betty Friedan articulated many of Plath's central frustrations in *The Feminine Mystique*. In *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the*

1960's, historian Stephanie Coontz details the powerful reaction American middle-class women had in response to Friedan's opus. Within the first months of publication, Friedan received hundreds of letters from women who believed *The Feminine Mystique* had saved their lives (xx). Friedan recognized the private disappointment of the housewife as well as the deep shame generated by "the silent question—*is this All?*" (Friedan 1). Presciently, Plath's work strives to create a grammar with which to address "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 63).

While Friedan clarifies the separation between the public and private spheres in order to argue that the public sphere generated social and political injustice, which served to silence the private sphere, Plath revels in the blurring of the spheres in an attempt to disrupt both. A consideration of the extreme emphasis on gender (specifically in regard to domesticity, motherhood, and the body), which Plath uses to stress "historical and private spheres" further illuminates the manner in which these poems invest themselves in uncanny remembrance. As Hirsch and Smith note, "cultural memory is always about the distribution of and contested claims to power. What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (6). As scholars such as

Christina Britzolakis and Susan Gubar have highlighted, "Lady Lazarus" is a complex and fascinating consideration of the relationship between gender and the manner in which secondary memory frames power relations.

"Lady Lazarus" perceives itself retroactively from its first line, "I have done it again." This declarative, abruptly end-stopped statement emphasizes the performative quality of this dramatic monologue while simultaneously insisting that the moment of performativity is past—it is already "done." Immediately, a temporal dislocation is established that distances the poem itself from the speaker and the speaker's recollections. The title of the poem, of course, compounds this sense of dislocation through its allusion to Lazarus of Bethany, the saint whom Christ restored to life four days after his death. While the raising of Lazarus is typically associated with rebirth and the power of Christian belief to triumph over death itself, Plath subverts the traditional reading of this story by assigning Lazarus not just a different gender, but also the title of "Lady." In this way, Plath forces a reconsideration of the idea of resurrection through the lens of gender and class in order to present this miracle not so much as "re/birth" or "re/surrection," but rather as a re/inscription or re/impression that is itself a form of repetition compulsion. In *Freud and the Scene of Trauma*, John

Fletcher provides a useful analysis of the relationship between the uncanny and repetition compulsion:

*Freud shifts the emphasis away from the content that is being repeated, with its combination of alien and the déjà vu, to the sheer fact of repetition itself. The uncanny feeling proceeds not from the return of the once familiar but no longer recognized in itself but from what that retention testifies to: the activity of autonomous—daemonic—inner compulsion-to-repeat independent of the content of what is repeated. (320)*

In light of Fletcher's analysis, it is especially significant that Lady Lazarus characterizes her resurrection, ironically, in the diction of commercial media because this particular medium heightens a sense of automated repetition. Like a "jingle," which makes noise by clattering against itself repeatedly, Lady Lazarus' resurrection testifies to the compulsion to repeat for the sake of repetition. She sarcastically disregards her "theatrical comeback in broad day" as a context-rich event and is decidedly scornful of the idea that her second birth is "A miracle!"

On the contrary, she claims that her new living body is only a "sort of walking miracle," which, upon further examination appears to be more akin to

an anti-miracle; a monstrous amalgam of the possessions of Holocaust victims. Indeed, it is this very conflation of life and death that generates the intellectual slippage that signifies the uncanny and positions Lady Lazarus as the personification of uncanniness (and, in the same vein, positions the uncanny as the anti-miraculous). We read that Lady Lazarus is resurrected not as a human, but as human form composed of inanimate objects:

...my skin  
bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen. (4-9)

While the repetition (and, as many critics have argued, appropriation) of the tragedy of the Holocaust assigns Lady Lazarus's monologue a distinctly traumatic texture, I would argue that this is not actually a traumatic remembrance, but an uncanny one. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud asserts that trauma manifests itself indirectly through intrusive "remembrances" which have not yet been incorporated into the psyche of the sufferer (7). Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth adapts Freud's initial theory to a study of literature in order to suggest that intrusive phenomena or unabsorbed affects (and their subsequent effects) cause a trauma

survivor's life narrative to exist in a non-linear narrative that, until recovery from the traumatic event, is contextually "dehistoricized" from the survivor's own life. It is not until the "unclaimed experience" of the trauma itself can be recalled that a trauma survivor can create a context for the previously unexplained text she has survived, but not yet incorporated into her recollection of personal history (Caruth 2-5). The structure of uncanny remembrance does, in many ways, act as a "double" of the structure of traumatic remembrance; both undergo a period of latency prior to the reincorporation of a memory. However, while the traumatic structure is the incorporation of memory that has been repressed as the result of an *external* event which could not be understood by the survivor in its moment of impact (i.e., "shellshock"), the uncanny structure is the reincorporation of an internal repression which has always been a component of the psyche and therefore understood on some level, but which has been, critically, repressed or erased. Caruth's notion of dehistoricization is therefore rendered somewhat inapplicable if Lady Lazarus is considered an uncanny actor instead of a trauma survivor. Subsequently, the implications of this poem in regard to the manner in which traumatic history itself relates to gender and power dynamics becomes significant.

"Lady Lazarus'" disturbing gesture of prosopopoeia (in which victims speak, impossibly, from inside the gas chamber) is conflated with an erotic burlesque performance in order to suggest that Plath's speaker has a distinctly gendered sense of incorporeality. Lady Lazarus' tone shifts from boastful to horrific to triumphant as her strip tease reveals not flesh, bone, or even corpse, but the space from which her decomposition took place. She begins her de-materialization with the curious pronouncement, "soon, soon the flesh/ the grave cave ate will be/ at home on me." The flesh, which has already decomposed (or been "eaten" by the cave), impossibly returns—significantly, it returns to "home," or the Heimlich. Via the dissolution of the female flesh, Plath has ingeniously constructed a scene in which the process of objectifying the body of Lady Lazarus becomes indistinguishable from the process of abjectifying the body of Lady Lazarus. Lady Lazarus manifests her rage at "the peanut-crunching crowd" who shove "in to see/ them unwrap me hand and foot" in the unveiling of her new form (referred to as "The big strip tease.") by historically situating (first via the Lazarus Myth and then via the Holocaust) the performance of being a "Lady."

Significantly, this particular historicization of performance is what assigns this poem its uncanny structure; the speaker is not incorporating the

Holocaust or the Lazarus Myth as a part of her own individual memory, rather, she is *conflating* it directly with her repressed psyche in an act that generates the chimeric Lady Lazarus. Paul Breslin questions Plath's conflation of myth and reality, asking "...did she fear that the experiential grounds of her emotions were too personal for art unless mounted on the stilts of myth or psycho-historical analogy" (110)? Breslin's reading of "Lady Lazarus" as a confessional poem in which the poet fears that "the experiential grounds of...emotions" are inherently artless seems to miss the point insofar as Lady Lazarus' (not Plath's) "experiential grounds" are presented not so much as "too personal" for the speaker, but for the speaker's audience.

Lady Lazarus's audience, composed first of "Gentlemen, ladies," then "Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy" and finally "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" is possessed of an increasingly patriarchal gaze that Lady Lazarus counters with a body which is weaponized by the uncanny conflation of her "psycho-historical" composition. The final five stanzas of "Lady Lazarus" perform a dynamic movement in which the speaker rapidly shifts her presentation of her cultural importance from inanimate yet cherished object to an enraged and murderous reincarnation of her own objectification.

Lady Lazarus begins her transformation with the statement:

*I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby (66-68)*

thereby asserting her belief that her body is the grand scale creation ("opus") of the patriarchal figures she is addressing. Furthermore, she recognizes her worth as a creation is entwined with a certain lack of personal history or identity; the nature of the opus is its triply asserted "purity." Plath's use of the word "pure" is, in this context, itself a psycho-historical conflation of the idealization of the virginal female body and the racial policy of the Third Reich. Plath complicates her speaker's objectified status with the dramatically enjambed line break between this stanza and the next,

*That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate  
your great concern.(69-71)*

The final image of an inanimate "pure gold baby" is gruesomely brought to life in the moment of its murder. This stunning turn is mimetic of the poem's controlling Lazarus motif; in both instances, the repressed can only emerge from its uncanny status (as living dead or golden baby) through an act of great violence.

In the next two stanzas, we read that this emergence first manifests itself as a palpable nothing, which then transforms into pure symbol:

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

*A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling. (72-77)*

While Lady Lazarus was once a compilation of body parts arranged in the shape of a strip tease performer or a construct of beliefs about feminine virtue (an "opus"), the violence of being "poked and stirred" has transformed her from a resurrected body/ideology to nothing at all. The "cake of soap," "wedding ring," and "gold filling" emerge from the fire as doubly uncanny objects. In one respect, they are uncanny simply because they conceal their horrific origins in the trappings of the familiar. But, more directly to my point concerning gender difference in the act of remembering, these objects symbolize domesticity, marriage, and beauty (respectively).

It is, of course, imperative to observe that Plath has selected these specific objects because they merge the idealized markers of femininity with the repurposed bodies of Holocaust victims. This merger insists that, for



Plath, to be female is to be objectified, but more importantly, to be objectified is always to also be abjectified. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains, "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (3)." To some degree, we can read that Plath's speaker has "permanently thrust aside" her own subjectivity in order to "theatrically" project that which only "feels real."

The severe juxtaposition between these object's double connotations has been deemed appropriative by many critics, who question "the poet's 'right' to Holocaust imagery" (Young 133). While some scholars have questioned Plath's ethics, others have questioned her sense of poetic scale, such as Irving Howe, who argues that, "it is decidedly unlikely" that the conditions of Jews living in the camps "was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, even if it had a very bad daddy indeed" (12-13). It is at the juncture of these two critiques (one which suggests Plath's identification is unethical and the other which suggests it is overwrought) that complex issues of gendered memory begin to emerge and a consideration of the manner in which the uncanny presents itself as the mode by which the repressed makes

itself apparent becomes salient to our understanding of Plath's controversial use of prosopopoeia and allusion.

### **"Dying is an art": Performing the Uncanny**

For Plath, the uncanny took on a political potential precisely because it is an aesthetic divorced from ethical matters; it inherently privileges being present—or, bringing to the surface that which has been repressed—over all other considerations. The political potential of the uncanny (to disturb an idealized version of the female body; to make monstrous the object of the gaze; to question norms regarding motherhood and domesticity) is founded in its ability to articulate a history of which its speaker has not participated, but rather articulated as emblems of her own circumstances. In this way, Plath's uncanny aesthetic has a radical capacity to disturb, or even rupture, the continuous, cohesive, and widely accepted historical narrative that instances of the uncanny necessarily place in doubt because its very essence is to resist comprehension. The political potential of the uncanny therefore rests in an ability to bring what is incomprehensible, unacceptable, or taboo to the center of conscious; quite actually, the uncanny gives voice to the dead.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is notable that Plath chooses to "give voice to the dead" not via a spectered medium, but via the risen dead (or, the zombie). In this way,

The Lazarus myth, on one hand, is a seemingly clear analogy for the repressed in the sense that Lazarus represents that which is repressed and dead to us, ergo, his resurrection signals a clear *return* to the repressed. Lazarus, as one risen from the dead, is both dead and alive in an exemplification of the slippage which is the fundamental hallmark of the uncanny. However, I argue that, although he is arisen from the dead, Lazarus of Bethany would not be classified by Freud as an uncanny actor at all. On the contrary, Lazarus would be considered quite canny according to Freud's definition, which stresses "intellectual uncertainty"<sup>8</sup> as the hallmark of an uncanny experience. Within its Biblical (and canonical)

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Plath again stresses the idea of the body as an object separate from its own subjectivity; she is also able to further emphasize the abject nature of the rotting corpse.

<sup>8</sup> Freud builds his definition of the uncanny upon Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," in which Jentsch argues the uncanny occurs when there is intellectual uncertainty as to whether or not a being is animate or inanimate. Jentsch considers the "The Sandman's" uncanny doll, Olympia, to be the signifier of the uncanny. Freud extends this consideration of the animate/inanimate binary, arguing that in uncanny literature, the uncanny becomes apparent when the reader themselves experiences intellectual uncertainty regarding whether or not the events related by the narrator are real or imagined.

context, the Lazarus narrative is given prominence because it is emblematic of Christ's power "over the last and most irresistible enemy of humanity—death" (Tenney). Rhetorically, the Lazarus Miracle is an act of witnessing intended to deny the ambiguity of death, therefore refusing the concept of the living dead. In other words, although Lazarus is arisen from the dead, he is defined by the miraculous certainty of his life. The Lazarus Myth, then, is decidedly *canny* because there is no question or uncertainty whatsoever regarding the narrator's reliability. Rather, to witness the Rising of Lazarus is to experience the total certainty of faith itself.

Plath's own version of the Lazarus myth, on the contrary, ruptures the continuous, highly canonical narrative presented in the Gospel of John via a reframing of the myth told from the voices of those who have been historically silenced and, subsequently, reincorporated into archival memory. Plath's *Lady Lazarus* is, rather, an apocryphal speaker who asserts her own version of history told from the unstable zone of repressed memory. To return to Hirsch and Smith's "Feminism and Cultural Memory," *Lady Lazarus* serves as "the female witness or agent of transmission" who actually comes to *perform the archive* in which "dynamics of gender and power" are made manifest. Vast components of this archive are, however, unavailable to

Lady Lazarus because they have not been incorporated into the collective memory and, therefore, lack the social, historical, and cultural structures that could contextualize those memories and, indeed, provide the vocabulary necessary to articulate them. As mentioned earlier, Plath utilizes an uncanny poetic technique in order to express that “which is familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated from the self only through the process of repression” (*The Uncanny* 217). Plath’s uncanny poetics stress the particularly gendered nature of this self-alienation in several ways: 1.) Her use of prosopeia conflates the objectified female body (grotesquely separated into pieces by the audience’s gaze) with pieces of Holocaust victim’s repurposed bodies in order to suggest that gaze itself transforms the body into a material, inanimate object whose crisis can be articulated only via the voices of the victims of genocide, who have themselves been made objects. 2.) While Plath’s use of prosopeia frames the always gendered experience of being the object of the gaze through the historically canonical (and accepted) experience of survivors, her use of allusion frames her private experience as a suicide survivor through allusions to commercial culture, the Bible, and the atrocity of the Holocaust. These allusions combine to create an impossible amalgamation which suggests that the repressed elements of Lady Lazarus’ psyche can only resurface

as a monstrous collage which borrows pieces from the history of others in order to write the history of her own alienation. It is important to note that in her biographical references to her three suicide attempts, Plath is acutely self-aware that she is suffering from repetition compulsion. I have already discussed the first line of the poem (“I have done it once again.”), in which Plath establishes the poem’s temporal dislocation; this line also immediately establishes the speaker’s awareness that she is compelled to repeat behavior patterns which we as readers soon learn to be denatured and yet, are regarded as triumphs to the speaker, who victoriously states:

*Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well. (42-22)*

Freud originally developed his theory of the phenomenon of repetition compulsion in his 1914 essay, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” as a pattern wherein an individual interminably repeats patterns of behavior that were established during a period of trauma in earlier life. It is clear that Plath’s speaker is repeating the trauma of a suicide attempt and, in fact, she goes so far as to provide a timeline (we learn that “One year in every ten” an attempt is made; that the first attempt occurred at the age of ten years old; the second at twenty; that the speaker is “only thirty”;

and, finally, that Lady Lazarus is monologizing the third of “nine times to die”) which further articulates the sense that the speaker is highly aware of her compulsion to repeat.

This compulsion is, in fact, an orchestrated performance. It is this quality of orchestration and performativity that transitions Lady Lazarus’ compulsion to repeatedly reenact her suicide attempt from a traumatic memory structure to an uncanny one. Freud again revisits the concept of repetition compulsion in *The Uncanny* (five years after its original inception) in order to suggest that the uncanny is also the result of an event that has been superseded in one’s psychic life and therefore serves as a reminder not of a suppressed external event, but a repressed internal event. The repressed internal event of “Lady Lazarus” does not, in fact, seem to be the speaker’s suicide attempts; we read, via the total recall and articulation with which the attempts are conveyed, that these suicide attempts are fully incorporated into the speaker’s psyche. Rather, the speaker seems to have repressed the very constructs (of history, commerce, and religion) that have combined to assign her a gendered identity.

Lady Lazarus’ sense that nothing is every truly erased, forgotten, or lost via repression becomes uncanny precisely because the events that she has

repressed emerge as the memories and experiences of others via her use of allusion and prosopopoeia. As Maurice Halbwachs, who developed the concept of collective memory, has suggested, memory is one of the elements of our social architecture that binds us to one another (22-49). Halbwachs’ foundational principles of memory theory, combined with Caruth’s previously mentioned trauma theory, suggests that the traumatic memory is that which both binds and refuses to be past. To position this within its psychoanalytic context, a collective is bound by the event that contains so much force its trace refuses to fade or be erased from the collective’s historical or narrative understanding of history. In this way, then, “Lady Lazarus” speaker’s inability to convey her trauma without borrowing from events such as the Holocaust or the Lazarus Myth in order to articulate her rage at constructs of gender indicates a larger cultural amnesia and repression. Trauma historian Judith Herman points out that a traumatic event can only come into consciousness once a political event (such as a war, election, etc.) has occurred which provides culture with the language to articulate the conditions of the trauma. The trauma that “Lady Lazarus” seeks to articulate, however, predates the language provided by the Women’s Movement and therefore must co-opt the language of other tragedies in a gesture which bears the uncanny marker of a psychic

economy which has gone bankrupt;  
which must use currency which is not its  
own.

## **"Like air": The Monstrous Nothing**

In the last two stanzas of "Lady Lazarus," the reader once again witnesses a violent rebirth of the speaker. Unlike the resurrections that have played out in the poem's previous twenty-six stanzas, this final act of transmogrification appears to have produced a new result. Lady Lazarus emerges as a sort of monstrous feminine figure to deliver a message of warning to yet another conflation of history, myth, and religion in the address:

*Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware. (78-80)*

One is reminded, here, of Plath's similar gesture in the poem "Daddy," in which the speaker addresses her father: "I used to pray to recover you/ Ach, du // In the German tongue, in the Polish town..." It seems that in the moment of direct articulation or confrontation with the systems that have repressed the speaker, she must borrow the language ("tongue"; "Herr") of the oppressor themselves to make herself understood. However, Plath begins to signal towards an inversion of this incorporation of oppressor to oppressed in the above stanza's rhyme scheme. Just as the hard

rhyme of "Herr" with the repeated "Beware" sonically<sup>9</sup> indicates to the reader that the oppressive forces have, quite actually, become a part of Lady Lazarus' language, the poem's final stanza suggests that the uncanny archive from which Lady Lazarus has expressed herself throughout the poem has now been weaponized and is capable of not just incorporating, but devouring, the oppressor:

*Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air. (81-83)*

Enraged, Lady Lazarus rises from nothing (the "ash" of the crematoria) with the ability to, in turn, regard the constructs that have degraded her as nothing ("air").

By the end of the "Lady Lazarus," Plath has transitioned genres: what was once horrifically uncanny is now only horrific. A differentiation of the uncanny from the horrific is necessary here. While the uncanny often displays elements of the horrific (such as feelings of fear, dread, repulsion, and terror) the horrific is founded in a "fear of the unknown"

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<sup>9</sup> Christina Britzolakis considers the sonic elements of the *Ariel* poems for their departure from Plath's earlier narrative strategies of subject-based dislocation in favor of poetic strategies reliant on sound sense and "oral/aural, incantatory element[s] at the level of language" (170).

(Lovecraft). The uncanny, conversely, is founded in a fear of the reemergence of that which was once known, but has been forgotten. Lady Lazarus is horrific when she emerges to “eat men like air,” but, importantly, the texture of intellectual uncertainty which was prominent in her previous manifestations is now gone. She “rise[s]” with her “red hair” as a fully recognizable woman; this last line is the poem’s first presentation of Lady Lazarus as analogous to an incarnation of Plath herself that is not conflated with death. The autobiographical detail, “red hair,” directs the reader towards a corporeal, intellectually certain rendering of Plath as woman (not a woman/corpse or woman/myth).

This moment is also significant in the larger context of *Ariel*’s highly symbolic color scheme. As Eileen M. Aird points out, “The world of *Ariel* is a black and white one into which red, which represents blood, the heart and living is always an intrusion” (85). The color red’s significance to *Ariel*’s symbolic order is perhaps best articulated in “Tulips,” a poem in which the speaker emerges from the white, sterile world of the hospital to the vivid, living world represented by the tulips by her bedside. In the following passage, we read red as both the marker of life and the marker of that which cannot be attained:

*And I am aware of my heart: it  
opens and closes  
Its bowl of red blooms out of  
sheer love of me.  
The water I taste is warm and  
salt, like the sea  
And comes from a country far  
away as health. (60-64)*

The reemergence of red in “Lady Lazarus,” signals that the speaker is no longer only an observer of “a country far away as health,” but a citizen of it. In accordance with the larger world of *Ariel*, Lady Lazarus’ red hair indicates that she is no longer speaking in an uncanny voice via a return to the repressed as symbolized by personification of the dead, but that she is now speaking in the horrific voice of a woman who has returned to her own body to “eat men like air.”

Interestingly, a consideration of Plath as an artist consciously evoking elements of horror positions her much more directly as a precursor to movements of political art during the 1970’s which were directly in dialogue with the Women’s Movement. In *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice*, Alexandra M. Kokoli considers the work of the visual artists in order to define and explore the political power of uncanny representations of femininity.<sup>10</sup> Kokoli argues:

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<sup>10</sup> In particular, Kokoli examines the work of Judy Chicago, Faith Wilding, and Robin Weltsch.

*Feminine writing takes place  
when the culturally repressed  
return with a vengeance, when  
the long censored and  
(presumed) impossible erupts  
into language and the world,  
throwing it into 'chaosmos.' [...]   
in which witches and female  
monsters are not merely  
reclaimed but reimagined as  
symbols of resistance and even  
revolutionary agents. (1-2)*

A consideration of Plath's own "Lady Lazarus" as a "female monster" birthed from an uncanny archive positions

Plath's speaker as an agent of destruction who can speak the culturally and politically "impossible." This consideration also removes Plath from her long-held position as a "confessional" poet primarily invested in the speaker's interiority. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the Plathian uncanny, however, is the promise that the monstered speaker is "the same, identical woman" as the confessional speaker who began the poem. Perhaps it is the insistence that for Plath, female interiority is itself alien, eerie, and by nature, repressed, which is the most horrific element of her poetry.

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# Sylvia Plath's Poems as Poetic Tableaux

By Ikram Hili

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In her poem "Cut," Sylvia Plath wrote:

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

Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
Dead white.  
Then that red plush.  
(*The Collected Poems* 235)

Autobiographical and domestic as they might read, these lines equally record the depth in Plath's words as they intimate the poet's success in liberating her words from the rigid formalism characterizing especially her early collection *The Colossus*, by symbolically abrading the "white, dead skin" swathing her early verse and allowing the "red plush" to spring out of the fountain of her artistic creativity. In fact, the colors white and red might refer, respectively, to Plath's early and late poetry—whiteness, in this regard, denoting the poet's early derivative, rigid style; with redness indicating the subversive and original writing style characterizing her more mature poems.<sup>1</sup> Put differently, to

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Peter Orr, Sylvia Plath commented on *The Colossus*, saying: "I can't read any of the poems aloud now, I didn't

Plath herself, the early poems are simply "stillborn," as she describes them in her poem "Stillborn"—originally entitled "A Beach of Dead Poems."<sup>2</sup> Effaced and self-effacing, they remain unrecognized within the male-dominated literary tradition of Plath's age, or at least, that is what she had often thought about them, because they were actually being published in the UK and in other renowned places for poetry to appear, such as *The New Yorker*. More direct and often potent, on the other hand, the later poems clearly communicate the poet's outrage not only against the dominant ideologies of the era but also against what was then deemed as "pure" art.

The present paper presents some of Plath's early and later poems as paintings drawn against the backcloth of postwar America's containment culture. Focusing on colors in Plath's poetry, the aim of this paper is also to

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write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me. These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me (*The Poet Speaks* 170).

<sup>2</sup> Draft of "Stillborn" MS. Plath MSS. The Lilly Library. Bloomington, Indiana.

dismiss, time and again, the haunting, bleak, and blank feel very often attached to her poetry. Sometimes the poems themselves display vivid color imagery while, at other times, the manuscripts leading to the final poetic product reveal a different story—a story of an excruciating writing process, a story recorded not only in words that very often do not make it to the poem we now have in print, but also a story painted in tears and blood, as it were. Plath's poetry is teeming with color imageries but this paper sheds light on white, red and blue—colors that I find very symbolic, again, of the poet's struggle as a woman artist in the fifties and early sixties and of her endeavor to make her words "go farther than a lifetime," as she once envisaged them to (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 99).

## White

*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.*

—Plath, (*The Collected Poems*  
160)

Myriad are the references to whiteness in Plath's poetry and so are the symbolic aspects attached to each. Among other things, whiteness stands for death, resignation and passivity,

reflecting the state of control and conformity that targeted women during Plath's time. Besides, there are other symbolic dimensions of this color, other than the ideological implications, especially in relation to writing. Put simply, whiteness also stands for the white canvas, the white backcloth against which Plath "painted" her poems. Whiteness, in this connection, can be literally construed as the blankness of the paper on which Plath inscribed her most compelling and often rebellious words.

As a wife and mother of two, Plath found it quite difficult to compose poems. For her, it was a strenuous effort to improve on the whiteness of the page and to subvert the period's multilevel, stifling ideologies: domestic, political and artistic, notably with regard to women artists during her time period. Plath imparts this aspect of whiteness in her hospital poems—such as "Face Lift," "In Plaster," "Tulips" and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m."—in which she describes the female body as deformed and manipulated by the well-oiled cultural machinery of postwar America. In "Tulips," for instance, she writes:

My body is a pebble to them,  
they tend it as water

Tends to the pebbles it must  
run over, smoothing them  
gently.

They bring me numbness in  
their bright needles, they bring  
me sleep.

Now I have lost myself I am sick  
of baggage.

(*The Collected Poems* 160)

The female body she sets on  
describing in these poems as well as  
the body of the poem itself that Plath  
wanted to carve and to paint out of  
blood and sweat—these two bodies  
are central and interconnected tropes  
of Plath's poetic imagination,  
providing her with some sort of a  
poetic release.

Whiteness equally stands for the  
"great" male academic skin on which  
Plath felt like "an ant in morning,"  
vulnerable, hardly visible, striving to  
hurdle the obstacles that stymied the  
flow of her artistic thought and energy  
(*The Collected Poems* 129; Draft 4 of  
"Surgeon at 2 a.m."). Noteworthy,  
here, is the analogy between the  
angry, clambering bees in Plath's "The  
Arrival of the Bee Box," and the angry  
words she also wanted to unleash,  
believing that "the box is only  
temporary" (*The Collected Poems*  
213). Like her bees, Plath's words are  
"[balling] in a mass, / Black / Mind  
against all that white" (*The Collected  
Poems* 218). Like her bees, too, Plath's  
words are "black on black" (*The  
Collected Poems* 213), "banded body  
to banded body," (from draft 2 of  
"Wintering") "filing like soldiers" (*The  
Collected Poems* 218) in their fight

against the dictates of hegemonic  
whiteness. Here, Plath seems to  
satirize the then dominant cultural  
discourse that is based on racial  
politics in which the bees/words, in  
their blackness, can be perceived as a  
threatening "other." Interestingly, in  
flying over the "engine that killed  
[them,]" the poet's bees/words paint a  
tableau of freedom and light. The  
image of blood reified through black  
ink is even more striking in "The  
Surgeon at 2 a.m." in which the poet  
eventually takes on the role of the  
surgeon, piercing into the body of the  
poem, in draft after draft, until the  
blackness of ink becomes red, which  
leads me to move to yet another  
important color in Plath's poetic  
tableaux: red.

## Red

The primary of primary colors, red is  
the color of defiance and anger, often  
stemming from suffering and struggle.  
Invoking blood, red can also be  
suicidal, standing for gruesome things  
if not for death itself. Nevertheless, it  
might also be perceived as the color  
of burning energy, of life, for it is the  
color of blood that carries oxygen to  
the human body parts. When it comes  
to Plath's poetic universe, the color  
red fulfills almost all these symbolic  
dimensions. However, given Plath's  
onerous literary journey, red stands, to  
a large degree, for the color of the  
symbolic blood that runs through the  
poet's manuscripts, reflecting a good  
deal of the poet's endeavor to "flay  
herself into" the poet she has become

nowadays, as she once wrote in one of her journal entries (*The Unabridged Journals* 381). It is an exertion in which she truly reveled, “O, only left to myself, what a poet I will flay myself into,” but one in which she was alive to her attendant suffering as she clearly maintained in a college essay that “[o]ne aspect needed on the road to genuine freedom...is suffering!”<sup>3</sup>

As advanced earlier, in Plath’s poetics, red fulfills symbolic dimensions, ranging from anger, death, suicide, to an even fervent embracing of life, paradoxically enough. In this connection, red and white are respectively tropes of life and death—a conspicuous equation that we find in drafts of “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.,” where Plath kept inserting then crossing out the following lines:

Life and death / Loom over me  
like roses, red and white;

Life and death hang over me  
like roses, red and white;

Life and death / Knot like roses  
on one bush – one red, one  
white.

(Draft 2 of “The Surgeon”)

Although jettisoned from the printed version of the poem, these lines make the connection between life and death on the one hand, red and white on the

other, very conspicuous. Most important, they reveal, albeit covertly, the poet’s wrestling with two divergent states of mind: embracing life and/or succumbing to death. As she wrote in her journals: “I have been, and am, battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it” (*The Unabridged Journals* 395). By association, in the course of her artistic labor, two situations inform her creative energy: either the ghastly whiteness of the page consumes her energy, leading to vapid, unimaginative poems (“stillborn” poems) or the poet rather sets on splashing the ghastly pallor of the white page with blood/ink, which makes her feel she is “a genius of a writer” (*Letters Home* 468).

Probably one of the best poems that show the colors red and white vying against each other for prominence is “Tulips,” a poem in which the redness of the tulips wants to outshine, if not utterly contain, the whiteness of the place. “Tulips” captures Plath’s recollection of her hospitalization for an appendectomy in March 1961 after a painful miscarriage. Read against the backdrop of the other hospital poems, “Tulips” can also be read as a cultural disclosure, as the speaker allows the body to confess what it painfully undergoes. Like many other poems, “Tulips” goes beyond the personal, unraveling cultural practices of control and conformity exercised in the

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<sup>3</sup> The Lilly Library Collection, Plath MSS II, Box 10 Folder 7, Indiana University Bloomington, IN.

institution of the hospital. "Tulips" is illustrative of the rivalry between redness and whiteness, that is, between the poet's rebellious thoughts on the one hand, and the containment culture promoting flatness and compliance with convention, on the other.

The opening lines of "Tulips" tantalize the reader's eyes with the compelling visual imagery of light diffused through immense visual imagery of whiteness, which then becomes suffused with the intrusive redness of the tulips. The caesura in the first line, "The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here," sets the tone for a thematic division between whiteness, the cold and the harshness of winter and the audacity and boldness of the "excitable" tulips coupled with the promise of spring (*The Collected Poems* 160). Furthermore, whiteness in "Tulips" is associated with "peacefulness." The speaker's direct address to the reader in these lines—"look how white everything is"; "How free it is, you have no idea how free —/ The peacefulness is so big it dazes you"—can be interpreted as a parody of the era's ideologies of conformity and the concomitant peace of mind, if at all (*The Collected Poems* 160-161). Here, Plath's speaker seems to be submerged in a state of utter passivity, "learning peacefulness," being exposed to the powerful, yet obliterating "lights" of the room, and feeling incarcerated within "these white walls" (*The Collected Poems* 160).

It is the redness of the "excitable" tulips that remind the speaker of the necessity of embracing life and evading deadly whiteness. The tulips show the speaker that they can still breathe "lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby," "even through the gift paper;" and in so doing, they prompt and inspire her to follow suit (*The Collected Poems* 161). It is as though the tulips' redness could not be consumed by the white tissues in which they are wrapped (or "swaddled"). The image of the tulips protruding from their white swaddle is set against the speaker's wound, which is noticeably red, stitched and sealed up. However, the speaker states that, "their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds," an image on which I shall dwell with more details as I examine Ted Hughes's last poem in his *Birthday Letters* Collection, "Red," in which he talks about what these colors—red, blue and white—probably meant for his wife.

## Blue

*This is the light of the mind,  
cold and planetary*

*The trees of the mind are black.  
The light is blue.*

—Plath, "The Moon and the  
Yew Tree"

Albeit not as present and as pronounced in her poems as red and white, blue remains a color of great import when it comes to Plath's poetic

imagination. One of the most compelling examples in which the poet evokes the color blue can be found in this last stanza of "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." in which she writes:

Tonight, for this person, blue is  
a beautiful color.

The angels of morphia have  
borne him up.

He floats an inch from the  
ceiling,

Smelling the dawn drafts.

(*The Collected Poems* 171)

Blue here announces a new soul, both light and free. To better understand the symbolism of the color blue in the above lines, it seems fitting to say a few words about the poem. In fact, the speaker in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." seems, at face value, totally passive, a vulnerable patient whose body is being tinkered with by the "rubber" hands of the surgeon. "The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven"—a propitious atmosphere of the notions of control and conformity associated with the institution of the hospital (*The Collected Poems* 171). The poem is fraught with gruesome and gory details about the operation (its cultural overtones cannot go unnoticed, either) namely when the speaker/surgeon describes the end result as "a pathological salami" soon to be "entombed in an icebox" (*The*

*Collected Poems* 171). All these details reinforce the speaker's suffocation as she has been frozen, literally and metaphorically, into the impotent patient position. It is only when the poet introduces the color blue that the speaker is freed from all the restraints foisted upon her. In those lines, blue is also the color of the first beams of light of dawn, thus announcing not only a new, free soul but also a fresher beginning.

Another line from the drafts of "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." struck me as unique when it comes to the symbolism of blue. In the fourth draft of the same poem, Plath's speaker says that she must seal off the body, shutter it closed, and "[l]et redness fill / The intricate, blue piping under the white marble." The image one might cull from these lines is redness, filling a blue pipe so as to reinvigorate a white marble. The blue pipe is therefore akin to a vein pumping new blood into the ghastly pallor of the marble. In this regard, it is, indeed, "a beautiful color," as Plath's speaker puts it (*The Collected Poems* 171). Even more striking is Ted Hughes's assertion, in his poem "Red," that "Blue is the jewel [Plath] lost," alluding to the life she had put an end to—hers, as well as the lives she had left behind. This leads me to the last part of this paper, briefly commenting on Ted Hughes's poem, "Red"—a poem that eloquently describes Plath's personal and artistic life in red, blue and white—an Americana image *par excellence*.



*In the pit of red*

*You hid from the bone-clinic  
whiteness.*

*But the jewel you lost was blue*

—Ted Hughes, “Red”

“Red” is the concluding poem of Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* collection, and symbolically, it not only provides a final reappraisal of the couple’s marital life but also comments on Plath’s artistic journey: her aesthetic choices as well as the ideologies with which she wrestled in her attempt to “perfect” her literary body (an image inspired from Plath’s “Edge”). Teeming with vivid visual imageries of red, white and blue colors, “Red” supports the main argument of this paper; i.e., showing Plath’s poetry as poetic tableaux.

Apostrophizing his deceased wife, Hughes rightly observes, “Red was your color. / If not red, then white,” which further stresses the fact that Plath’s life in general had been much informed by, and can even be defined in terms of these two colors. Hughes soon qualifies his first assumption, averring instead that red is what she “wrapped around [her]”—“blood-red ... for warming the dead” (1169). Here, blood and the color red may stand for protection, defiance but also for life as it can warm the dead, resuscitating “these poems [that] do

not live” and making up for their “sad diagnosis,” as Plath writes in “Stillborn” (*The Collected Poems* 142).

Further commenting on Plath’s penchant for the color red, Hughes adds: “You reveled in red / I felt it raw”—stubborn, angry and thus unmarred by other colors (1169). It springs out of a “stiffening wound” being healed up into “a crusted gleam,” as he puts it. Nevertheless, the wound is no longer festering; it is rather emitting a glaring light, as palpable as the skin itself. Lingered still, the enduring presence of the wound may reinforce pain; however, it is a reminder that a wound may sometimes emanate light and hope.

The second stanza of “Red” evokes the color red with more intensity, depicting it as blood splashed all over the couple’s room. Interestingly, Hughes describes the room as a “throbbing cell,” metaphorically alluding to the poet’s beating heart and to her passion for writing, which is also literally the color of Plath’s room at Court Green.<sup>4</sup> “Only the

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<sup>4</sup> In *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath*, Gail Crowther describes Plath’s room in Court Green as such: “On 31 August 1961, Plath and Hughes moved to Court Green, a large house in the Devonshire market town of North Tawton. For the first time in her professional, adult working life, Plath had a room of her own for the sole purpose of writing. ... Inside this room, Plath treated herself to a *bright red* carpet, a six-foot elm plank writing desk, and *deep red* curtains” (Emphasis added 108).

bookshelves escaped into whiteness," he writes, arguing that Plath's books represent the whiteness that she herself wanted to disentangle herself from; that is, her early desire to emulate the era's literary canon—"an itch to emulate" that kept her from asserting a voice of her own, especially when she composed her first poems (*The Unabridged Journals* 344). The bookshelves escaping into whiteness might equally read as Hughes's appreciation of whiteness, associating redness with suicidal thoughts and death. This idea is quite pertinent as he later describes his wife sequestering herself in a "pit of red:" "pit" literally means a hole that gets darker and more hollow the more Plath digs into it, while figuratively it can refer to depression leading to suicide. Apart from literally referring to the hospital whiteness, these lines, "in the pit of red / You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness," symbolically substantiate Plath's perception of whiteness as a symbol of the derivative style that characterizes especially her early works.

Redness invades Plath's inner and outer surroundings; that is, not only inside the room but also outdoors, through the "red poppies" and "salvias" that are "as skin on blood." Here, it seems that these flowers act like protective skin, symbolically wrapping the poet's wounds and containing the failure (as she thought<sup>5</sup>)

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<sup>5</sup> "These poems do not live; it's a sad diagnosis," thus wrote Plath in her poem "Stillborn" (*The Collected Poems* 142).

of her first attempts at writing poetry. Abrading that skin could be painful, but in doing that, one encounters "the blood jet of poetry," as Plath writes in "Kindness" (*The Collected Poems* 270). As if building on this metaphor, Hughes describes these red flowers as "blood lobbing from the gush," as the fountain of Plath's creative energy—"there is no stopping it" (*The Collected Poems* 270). Another plausible interpretation of this metaphorical use of flowers, skin and blood is probably Plath's desire, in Hughes's sense, to pluck those "thin and wrinkle-frail" flowers, allowing for the "blood jet of poetry" to gush so as to galvanize her poetic tableaux with even more vividness and vibrancy.

More to the point, Hughes describes the red poppies and salvias as "the heart's last gout," last drop of blood where the "blood jet of poetry," which Plath describes in "Kindness," probably stops (*The Collected Poems* 270).<sup>6</sup> As Tim Kendall points out, "a blood jet which cannot be stopped leads eventually to death" (149). But

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes's many references to blood, here, evoke Garcia Lorca's "*duende*"—an intense, fierce source of inspiration. In "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly," he describes it as "some ambiguous substance, simultaneously holy and anathema, some sort of psychological drug flourishing in the blood-stream. Lorca gave it a name, calling it the Duende, when he described how even in one person, in one half-minute, it irrupts from the faintest titillation to the soul-rending" (qtd. in Yvonne Reddick 686).

even so, the odor of the flowers will forever bleed from their deep throats—an image drawn in Plath’s “Edge” (*The Collected Poems* 273). The absence of physical blood here might refer to the poet’s ink being dried up, given her tragic death; nevertheless, its “odor” lingers on in Plath’s manuscripts that have never ceased to prompt fresher readings ever since she died.

“Everything you painted you painted white / Then splashed it with roses, defeated it”—the use of enjambment in these lines refers to the urgency of smearing furniture with those “dripping roses, / Weeping roses, and more roses,” as Hughes writes, which mirrors the arduous process of writing and presents, time and again, Plath’s poetry as paintings of tears and blood. Among these roses, sometimes she would paint a blue bird, Hughes tells us. Notice that in Hughes’s poem, “Bird” concludes the stanza and occupies, on its own, the entire last line, symbolizing freedom, autonomy and celestial beauty. “Blue was wings,” Hughes adds, perhaps alluding to Plath’s queen bee flying “over the engine that killed her— / The mausoleum, the wax house,” breaking loose from the “box” (*The Collected Poems* 215). In a melancholic tone and quite lamentably, though, Hughes states: “But the jewel you lost was blue.” It follows, then, that the “blue piping” that reinvigorates the white, pale marble that she tries to mend in “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.” is cut; the vein is

severed from the body, Plath’s (*The Collected Poems* 171). However, before departing from this world, Plath made sure to dismantle “this white wall,” letting “the sun [dissolve] on this wall, bleeding its light” into her radiant words that “emanate a heat and light that can still combust a reader today” (*The Collected Poems* 195; Axelrod 73).

## Conclusion

As has been observed, Sylvia Plath’s poems can be regarded as poetic tableaux, in which the poet gave more color and verve to her artistic energy. In several of Plath’s poems that contain color imagery, we notice that white, red and blue are three colors that can best encapsulate the poet’s personal and aesthetic development, from bleak moments in which Plath admits, “This is the room I could never breathe in,” to more hope-sustaining moments in which she asserts, “The box is only temporary” (*The Collected Poems* 218; 213). Plath’s rejection of whiteness and her desire to make her words obliterate the blankness of the page as she writes her poems, her embrace of redness as a catalyst for the anger igniting the fervor of her late poems in particular, and her allusion to celestial blue as the color of peace, hope and promising new beginnings—all these color references attest to the painterly qualities inherent in Plath’s poetics and remind us that, for Plath, poetry was indeed a serious, life-changing effort.

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# Her Own Words

## Describe Her Best?

### *Reconstructing Plath's Original Ariel in Sylvia (2003) and Wintering (2003)*

by Bethany Layne

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My mother's poems cannot be crammed into the mouths of actors in any filmic reinvention of her story in the expectation that they can breathe life into her again, any more than literary fictionalization of my mother's life . . . achieves any purpose other than to parody the life she actually lived. Since she died my mother has been dissected, analyzed, reinterpreted, reinvented, fictionalized, and in some cases completely fabricated. It comes down to this: her own words describe her best (Hughes xvi-ii)

In her introduction to *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004), Frieda Hughes holds up a mirror to the Janus-face of Plath studies, a discipline composed of biography and literary criticism. As Hughes suggests, the critical face of Plath studies often fears that biographical narratives, whether conventional or fictional, divert attention away from Plath's "own words." As Janet Badia has shown, such fears inform the hostility

towards reading Plath's poems biographically (felt since the publication of Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976)), and for the favoring of formalist reading practices deemed to carry greater critical legitimacy (11). But, the biographical face has argued, is popular interest in Plath's writing not catalysed by the notoriety of her life and death? Ought critics not, on some level, be grateful to the "soap opera life story" for generating an appetite for work by and about Plath, making Plath studies a sustainable discipline? Or does biographical interest serve only to "shape . . . and distort" (Brain, "Dangerous Confessions" 28)?

Such questions have long been circulating, and eddy around the publication of the Restored Edition of *Ariel*, "reinstating [Plath's] original selection and arrangement." In her Foreword, Hughes defends her decision to hang the blue plaque commemorating Plath's life at 3 Chalcot Square, where Plath had written *The Bell Jar*, published *The Colossus*, and delivered her first child,

rather than at the flat around the corner where she died. In words certain to haunt any literary pilgrim to 23 Fitzroy Road, Hughes asserts that “we already have a gravestone . . . We don't need another” (xvi). Yet Hughes's self-fashioning as a forbidding guardian against prurient interest in her mother's life is at odds with her presentation of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, a simulacrum of the manuscript on the desk “when [Plath] died” (xv). Despite framing herself as resisting this aspect of “*Ariel's* notoriety” (xv), Hughes exploits the resemblance: the cover photograph reproduces the original document, bundled together with an elastic band, and she includes a facsimile of Plath's typewritten pages, which, with the exception of a few handwritten corrections, merely duplicates the printed *Ariel* that precedes it. *The Restored Edition* thus betrays a tension between form and content, its sensationalist presentation belying its immense critical value as a document Ted Hughes had suppressed for more than forty years.

In this article, I reveal how the filmic and literary representations criticised by Frieda Hughes have the opposite tension between form and content. By focusing on their content, and overemphasising their efforts to “breathe life into” Plath, Hughes devalues the considerable significance of their form. The works in question are Christine Jeffs' biopic *Sylvia*, which Hughes feared would screen a “monster,” a “*Sylvia Suicide Doll*” (Hughes, “My Mother” l.100-101), and

Kate Moses's biographical novel *Wintering*, the “idea” of which Hughes reputedly “disliked . . . as its subject was ‘private’” (Moses, “Whose Plath”). The content of both prioritises Plath's life over her work: *Sylvia's* rendering of a seven-year love affair was, as screenwriter John Brownlow acknowledged, “only incidentally a story about two poets” (vi), while *Wintering* focuses on the fallow period between Plath's completion of her *Ariel* manuscript and the composition of her final poems. These were weeks in which she was “wintering in a dark without window” (Plath, “Wintering” l.6), the creation of new work sacrificed in the face of her “courageous motherly struggle to stay alive” (Moses, “Baking”). Accordingly, Moses's *Sylvia* frequently prioritises her children over her writing: “[her son] needs her now. She leaves the poems where they are” (*Wintering* 141).<sup>1</sup>

But while the content of *Sylvia* and *Wintering* could be said to “breathe life into” Plath as wife and mother, rather than as poet, their forms engage intimately with her then-unpublished *Ariel* manuscript. The climax of *Sylvia* is a montage of the subject writing, delivering seemingly disconnected lines from *Ariel* in voice-over. When unravelled, the lines pose a coded challenge to Ted Hughes's

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, “Plath” and “Hughes” will be used to refer to the historical persons and the figures in *Birthday Letters*, “Sylvia” and “Ted” to the fictional characters in *Sylvia* and *Wintering*, and “Paltrow” and “Craig” to the actors in *Sylvia*.

rearrangement of, and additions to, *Ariel*, a challenge reiterated in the film's ending. Moses stages a more explicit critical intervention, naming her forty-one chapters after the *Ariel* poems as selected and arranged by Plath, with the intention of reminding Plath's estate "that it's still sitting on one unpublished manuscript. . . the *Ariel* poems in their proper order" ("The Last Plath").

As Ted Hughes acknowledged, *Ariel* as ordered by Plath had a "narrative of extraordinary positive resolution" ("Sheep in Fog" 191), emphasised by Plath's arrangement of the collection to begin with the word "Love" and end with the word "Spring." The poems were completed by the end of 1962, and, in Hughes's account, erupted from the fault line where the crises of marital separation and a resurgence in Plath's traumatic feelings towards her father were confronted with her "battle to create a new life, with her children" ("Sheep in Fog" 191). Yet by appending "about nine of the last poems," written in 1963 and regarded by Plath "as the beginning of a new book" (Hughes, "Publishing" 167), Hughes overwrote *Ariel*'s triumphant "drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" with a narrative of despair (Plath, "Ariel" l.29-31). In the words of Moses, the version of *Ariel* Hughes published in 1965 was "an extended suicide note," which made Plath's death appear "inevitable" ("Lioness"). Hughes quietly acknowledged his emendations in an appendix to Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981), to which the

first critical response was Marjorie Perloff's "The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon" (1984), a groundbreaking study that revealed the radically different characters of the two versions. This paved the way for Lynda K. Bundtzen's *The Other Ariel* (2001), the only book-length comparative study of the volumes to date.

*Sylvia* and *Wintering*'s contributions to this critical field is best understood by placing them in conversation with their paratexts, defined by Gerard Genette as "a *threshold*, or . . . a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (2). The paratext is made up of two halves: the "inward side," or peritext, composed of the non-narrative elements of the physical text, and the "outward side," or "epitext," which incorporates "any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating . . . in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (344). Significant features of *Sylvia*'s epitext include the shooting script, which differs significantly from the finished film, Frieda Hughes's poem "My Mother" and the two *Ariels*; reading *Sylvia* in dialogue with these liminal texts reveals the critical impetus behind the commercial success. Together with the peritextual elements of title, intertitles, postface, and author's note, *Wintering* makes similar use of its epitext, which includes Moses's personal interviews and autocommentaries, the original *Ariel*, and *Birthday Letters*. Other

crucial aspects of *Wintering's* epitext are Perloff's essay and Catherine Thompson's article "Dawn Poems in Blood," texts "key to [Moses's] understanding of Sylvia Plath" (*Wintering* 340). The presence of these works in the hinterland of a novel is indicative of "the spilling over into the public domain of so many scholarly projects attentive to Plath's version of [her] manuscript," forming a trans-genre dialogue that "contributed toward the momentum to publish Plath's version of *Ariel*" (Helle 646). In the process, Moses also offers a way of reading that version biographically, but as a blueprint for a life rather than a record.

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It was in the free-verse polemic "My Mother" that Frieda Hughes first voiced her feelings about the ongoing production of *Sylvia*. Originally published in the March 2003 issue of *Tatler*, the poem was covered by forums including the Montreal Gazette and CNN, becoming, ironically, "a publicity generator . . . for the film" (Badia 163). "My Mother" rewrites Plath's "Lady Lazarus," figuring the adaptive process as a repeated act of grave-robbing through which Hughes's "buried mother / is up-dug for repeat performances" (l.11-12). Whereas resuscitation is one of the most popular metaphors for biographical representation, through which the subject is "brought back to life," Hughes insists that the film is simply "killing her again" (l.1). It is mere prurience, Hughes implies, that

prompted the filmmakers to approach her for the rights to Plath's work, and the poem's climax conveys her horror at being asked "to give them my mother's words / To fill the mouth of their monster" (l.42-3). Hughes's withholding of the rights to both of her parents' work meant that they could only be quoted in fragments shorn of context, part of a long tradition of withholding permission to quote "when 'the Estate' did not agree with the point of view being expressed" (Churchwell 112). As Sarah Churchwell has noted, Plath scholars have tended to view this (mis)use of copyright control as a form of censorship (112).

Yet Hughes's interdict forced Jeffs and Brownlow to devise creative strategies to maintain the "literary" aspect of their biopic. Whereas Brownlow's original shooting script was heavily reliant on *Birthday Letters* (1998), incorporating scenes reprising the narratives of "Ouija," "Epiphany," and "A Table," and others utilising fragments from "The Minotaur" and "Life After Death," the finished film was able to evade the authority of Ted Hughes. In the film as shot, his influence is detectable only on the level of image, the use of costume in the wedding scene, for instance, mirroring Hughes's "cord jacket" and Plath's "pink wool knitted dress" in the eponymous poem from *Birthday Letters*. The film's development from page to screen thus mirrors the trajectory of its narrative, which charts Sylvia's attempts to establish a poetic identity distinct from that of her



husband. The film's "outgrowing" of Hughes's influence is also in keeping with its contestation of his edition of *Ariel*. The end result is reflective of Pamela Matthews' prognosis for the future of Plath criticism after Hughes's death: "Sylvia Plath will emerge more powerfully on her own" (93).

Sylvia's first moment of subversion lies in a scene towards the end of the film, in which Gwyneth Paltrow sits at her desk at Court Green in the immediate aftermath of Daniel Craig's desertion and writes the word "Daddy" at the top of a blank page. The screenplay reveals that the lines originally chosen from the scene were as follows:

You stand at the blackboard,  
daddy,

In the picture I have of you,

A cleft in your chin instead of  
your foot

But no less a devil for that, no  
not

Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

(l.51-6)

Brownlow's choice is an implicitly seditious gesture given Ted Hughes's acknowledgement that, while "Daddy" was a "great poem," he "would have cut [it] out" from *Ariel* "if I'd been in time" (PSP 167). Hughes's motivations are implicit in the lines

intended for the following scene, in the background to which he hovers:

If I've killed one man, I've killed  
two—

The vampire who said he was  
you

And drank my blood for a year,

Seven years if you want to know.

(l.71-4)

His daughter's interventions were, however, timely enough for "Daddy" to be excised from the film, where the lines spoken in voice-over are instead taken from eleven other *Ariel* poems. This is an interesting decision given Brownlow's insistence that the film should not be "dependent on the audience being interested in Sylvia Plath"; such an audience could be forgiven for thinking that the eleven poems were composed in a single night (v). While such compromises are endemic to the literary biopic as a genre, which must appeal to audience members with varying degrees of foreknowledge, they are exacerbated by the Plath Estate's sanction on quoting the *Ariel* poems in their rightful context. For Al Alvarez, "Plath, however, gains by the restriction," the juxtaposition of disconnected lines convincingly representing "a creative mind working flat-out" ("Ted, Sylvia and Me" n.pag). Transcribed, the lines read as follows:

This is the light of the  
mind. (The Moon and  
the Yew Tree, l.1)

If the moon smiled, she  
would resemble you.  
("The Rival," l.1)

Their redness talks  
("Tulips," l.39)

she would drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.  
("Elm," l.22-3)

Thick, red and slipping.  
("Getting There," l.36)

your nakedness  
Shadows our safety.  
("Morning Song," l.5-6)

Whose is that long white  
box in the grove, ("The  
Bee Meeting," l.55)

I need feed them  
nothing, I am the owner.  
("The Arrival of the Bee  
Box," l.25)

I sizzled in his blue volts  
("The Hanging Man," l.2)

Our cheesecloth  
gauntlets neat and  
sweet, ("Stings," l.3)

Bare-handed, I hand the  
combs.  
The man in white smiles,  
("Stings," l.1-2)

so I can't see what is in  
there. ("The Arrival of  
the Bee Box," l.9)

some god got hold of  
me ("The Hanging Man,"  
l.1)

Lightly, through their  
white swaddlings,  
("Tulips," l.38)

I cannot undo myself,  
and the train is steaming.  
("Getting There," l.38)

The only poem not taken from Plath's original arrangement of *Ariel* is "The Hanging Man," an early poem appended to Hughes's version because it "describes with only thin disguise the experience which made *Ariel* possible" (PSP 167). Its inclusion in the above litany is something of a red herring, given that the film as shot omits Plath's subjection to Electro-Convulsive Therapy. The others lines are, without exception, from the wave of poems written in 1962 and arranged by Plath under the title *Ariel*. Significantly, none of the late poems appended by Hughes is represented. And, in a fascinating twist, the ending of the above "poem" reveals a decided privileging of fragments from the Bee sequence, the five poems with which Plath concluded her arrangement. In a coded gesture that has gone unnoticed until now, the filmmakers quietly champion the authority of Plath's original manuscript.

Sylvia's critical intervention is emphasised when comparing the ending of the screenplay to that of the finished film. Scene 235 as scripted incorporates lines and images from "Edge," one of Hughes's additions and the penultimate poem in his arrangement. Dated February 5, six days before Plath's death, it is widely represented as Plath's final poem, having a more conveniently sensational narrative than "Balloons," written on the same day ("The Last Poem"). In the screenplay, Ted visits St. Pancras Mortuary, lifting "a WHITE SHROUD to reveal Sylvia's body" (Brownlow 111), as Sylvia speaks, in voice over, the following lines:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of  
accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
  
("Edge" l.1-5)

Brownlow writes that "As we GLIDE AROUND, we see that the white shroud does indeed seem like some kind of toga," a direction that transforms the subject of the poem into an autobiographical referent (111). A shot of "her naked feet" then summons the final lines of both poem and film:

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.

The use of lines from "Edge" to overlay shots of its author's body symbolises a stubborn critical trend, summarised by Annika Hagström: the poem "is directly connected to Plath's suicide, as if she had written it posthumously"; it is a "prophecy" of which Plath is the "heroine" (42). This interpretation is driven home in the previous scripted scene, in which a policeman at the scene of the suicide remarks that "they usually leave a note." "She did," Ted replies, opening the *Ariel* manuscript at "a poem called EDGE," which "fills the screen" (Brownlow 111).

In this scene, "Edge" becomes metonymically representation of the 1965 *Ariel*, a collection often discussed, as Tracy Brain writes in a different context, as though it "prefigured and caused [Plath's] death" ("Fictionalising" 190). Philip French takes credit for the inception of this idea, citing a 1965 episode of *New Comment*, his weekly review on the *Third Programme*, in which "her suicide was introduced as an essential way of understanding these late poems" (n.pag). Contrary to Hughes's insistence, in "Publishing Sylvia Plath," that *Ariel* marked Plath's phoenix-like emergence from the ashes of her failed relationships, this was the reading he ultimately confirmed in *Birthday Letters*, which mythologizes *Ariel* as a poetics of disintegration that would turn upon and destroy its creator. For French and others writing twenty years before Hughes's

revelation of Plath's original ordering in his appendix to her *Collected Poems*, *Ariel* was irrevocably tainted by the addition of the late works. *Sylvia* as scripted perpetuates this link between *Ariel* and Plath's death, wilfully misrepresenting "Edge" as though it were included in her original manuscript.

Yet regardless of whether contextual knowledge of Plath's suicide aids interpretation of "Edge" and the other late poems, "Contusion" and "Words," neither the death nor these poems has anything to do with Plath's *Ariel*, which was complete by the end of 1962. The "fallacious link" is severed in the completed film (Brain, "Fictionalizing" 190), which dispenses with "Edge" and the mortuary scene entirely, showing only a fleeting glimpse of Paltrow's body as Craig kisses the manuscript and imagines her peaceful face. The final lines from *Ariel*, spoken in voice-over as the kitchen door closes behind Paltrow, are instead from "The Arrival of the Bee Box":

The box is locked, it is  
dangerous. (l.6)

There are no windows, so I can't  
see what is in there.

There is only a little grid, no exit.  
(l.9-10)

The context admittedly permits us to read the poem as prophesy, as "Edge" has been read, supported by

the title of the scene ("No Exit") and by Brownlow's assertion that "the audience had to feel that every door had closed on her" (viii). Yet the poem's ending, unlike that of "Edge," suggests liberation rather than hopelessness: its locked box is "only temporary"; its speaker "will be sweet God, I will set them free" (l.35-6). This moment in the film can, then, be interpreted as a move towards transcendence, as supported by the shot of the closed door dissolving into an earlier, reprised shot of Paltrow's face, "seraphic, bathed in light" (Brownlow 107). The development of the final moments of *Sylvia* from page to screen reflects, in microcosm, the tonal contrasts between the two *Ariels*, and their perceived relationship to their author's death. The screenplay ends on a note of despair, perpetuating the connection encouraged by Hughes between *Ariel* and Plath's suicide. The film disrupts this connection, privileging *Ariel*'s intended drive towards renewal and allowing its subject to "taste the spring" ("Wintering" l.50)

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A similar effect is rehearsed when comparing Kate Moses's title to that of another biographical work published in the same year. Whereas Paul Alexander's play *Edge* (2003) nominally affirmed Hughes's decision to append the late poems, Moses's choice of title provides eloquent support for Plath's concluding Bee sequence. While Genette is alert to the potential for self-aggrandisement

attendant upon quotation titles, Moses use of the verb “Wintering” thus suggests far more than the desire for “the prestige of a cultural filiation” (Genette 91). Her engagement with Plath’s manuscript is confirmed by the titles of *Wintering*’s forty-two chapters, which mirror the original arrangement of *Ariel*. By reconstructing Plath’s original contents page, Moses frames her text as an implicit “curative, or corrective” to the image of the poet created by Hughes (Genette 239). This image is suggestively evoked in her postface, which juxtaposes a litany of Hughes’s additions with the statement “On February 11, 1963, Sylvia Plath took her own life” (336). Moses’s implication that Hughes’s interventions fostered a relationship between *Ariel* and Plath’s death is made explicit in her *Salon* article “The Real Sylvia Plath: Part One.” There, she accuses Hughes of “changing [*Ariel*’s] tone and theme from one of transformative rebirth to one of inevitable self-destruction” (n.pag).

This statement frames Hughes’s editorial interference with the *Ariel* manuscript as an act of critical overwriting, supported by the postface’s suggestive detail that “Edge” was “composed on the back of a draft of ‘Wintering’” (336). Conversely, Moses’s feminist recovery sees Sylvia typing the final draft of “Wintering” on the reverse of her husband’s manuscript: “She wants a woman’s story, not a man’s. She wants her fingerprints all over his page, *her* page, *her* words, *her* survival. His manuscript was right there, under her

desk, to reinscribe” (193). Inverting Hughes’s suggestive juxtaposition of “Your story. My story.” in *Birthday Letters* (“Visit” l.69), Sylvia’s triumphant reclamation of “*her* page” is a synecdoche for Moses’s insistence that *Ariel* must be republished to reveal the “woman’s story, not the man’s.” These intended real-world implications are confirmed by the loss of the “genre indication” “A novel of Sylvia Plath” between the American and British additions of *Wintering* (Genette 97), corroborating Sandra Gilbert’s assertion that Moses “define(s) her task not just (or even principally) as the crafting of a fiction but as a sort of critical hypothesizing” (3).

Such critical impetus is also evident in Moses’s Author’s Note, an addendum “used most often with texts whose fictionality is very ‘impure’” (Genette 332). The note confirms her novel as a scholarly undertaking, detailing her independent research in the archives of Indiana University and Smith College, and foregrounding her dialogue with numerous other writers, including Perloff, Thompson, and Plath, her “most essential source” and “ultimate inspiration” (341). As suggested previously, Moses’s popularisation of debates set in motion by Perloff had ontological implications, lending weight to the argument in favour of a new edition of *Ariel* by drawing attention to “why the differences between the two versions . . . matter” (Badia 162). In turn, her rehearsal of Thompson’s findings has epistemological consequences,

helping to disentangle the vexed relationship between writing and suicide. The fundamental ideas of Thompson's essay, first published in Northwestern's journal *TriQuarterly*, were reproduced in "The Real Sylvia Plath: Part Two," helping Thompson to engage with a wider, less specialised readership than she would have reached in a graduate publication. This continues the conversation between literary criticism and popular culture previously witnessed in Moses's engagement with Perloff. In excavating a relationship between Plath's physical and artistic fertility, Thompson and Moses build on Ted Hughes's ideas, which warrant brief attention at this juncture. Hughes was attuned to the way in which Plath's two deliveries enabled her to "compose at top speed, and with her full weight" as "all the various voices of her gift came together" (SP: A 162), while reproduction was his preferred metaphor for the development of Plath's *Ariel* voice, "that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self" (SP: J 189). The influence of these writings is felt in *Wintering*, in which Sylvia recognises the birth of Frieda as "the beginning of her real existence" (11), and produces "a spurt of good poems" after the birth of each child (231). Her experience of labour is then symbolically conflated with the act of writing to form a unique bodily poetic: "the plates of the skull folding, slipping tectonically like a world, to get through her bones" (126). Moses thus confirms in fiction what she had

previously iterated in her criticism: that motherhood afforded Plath access to "the material that she had always needed" ("Lioness").

Yet while these details reflect Hughes's emphasis on the nine-month cycles of Plath's respective pregnancies, Thompson also enables a narrower focus. She excavates a relationship between the phases of Plath's menstrual cycles and the *Ariel* poems' vacillation between "metaphoric renewals and optimistic transformations" and "jagged, seething accusations and aggression" ("The Real SP" 2). Thompson combines these poetic oscillations with Plath's well-documented cycles of insomnia to support a diagnosis of premenstrual dysphoric disorder, for which Plath was awaiting a referral for treatment at the time of her death. Indeed, she posits that a previous "suicide attempt was directly precipitated by hormonal disruption during the late luteal phase of her menstrual cycle" (qtd. in "The Real SP" 2). Moses corroborated Thompson's findings against Plath's unabridged journals, which confirmed the link between her menstrual cycles and the waves of *Ariel* poems ("The Real SP" 2). She states that she found the possibility of a bodily explanation for Plath's changes in poetic tone "breathtaking," insofar as it integrated her "life as a woman and as a writer . . . without diminishing [her] achievement in any way" ("The Real SP" 2). The impact of Thompson's findings is palpable in *Wintering*, in which the suggestion that "twenty-

one" of the *Ariel* poems were completed in "twenty-eight days" conflates the "agony drag" of menstruation with the "real red thing" of poetry (124-5).

When situated in dialogue with Perloff's essay, Thompson's findings inflect Moses's project of feminist reconstruction in two important ways. Firstly, they provides physiological evidence for the thematic differences between the two *Ariels*, explaining the abrupt change in trajectory when poems written at the nadir of Plath's cycle were appended to the Bee sequence, and supporting Moses's belief that the two arrangements were radically different entities. Secondly, the suggestion that "Plath's true demon was not something of her own making but a force or forces she was quite powerless against" connects her suicide to physiological imbalances ("The Real SP" 2), contesting its attribution to her writing, implicit in Hughes's *Ariel* and directly stated in *Birthday Letters*. It resists the "hysterics[ing]" of Plath by "a male literary tradition" (Rose 28), and liberates her writing to tell "the story of her own survival" ("The Real SP" 2).

For Moses, Plath's *Ariel* is nothing less than an "encoded autobiography" ("The Real SP" 1), with a narrative "embedded almost anagrammatically within the . . . poems if you put them back in their order" ("Lioness"). The poems have, she suggests,

a logical sequence, a narrative cohesion that

amounted to a mythic performative utterance. She was putting them in an order that would tell her the story of her own survival, her phoenixlike eruption from the ashes of her destroyed marriage and the shed skin of her "false" selves. ("The Real SP" 2)

At the root of this mythologizing of the subject is the suggestion that the "other" *Ariel* should be read biographically, that the reader's proper task is to excavate a "parallel track to what was going on in [her] life at the time" ("Lioness"). For Brain, such a mode of reading does a disservice to Plath, implying that she was "too unimaginative to make anything up, or too self-obsessed to consider anything of larger historical or cultural importance" ("Dangerous Confessions" 28). Conversely, for Badia, the critical resistance to considering Plath as a confessional poet is unhelpfully reductive, closing down autobiographical and feminist approaches rather than encouraging "the diversity of interpretations surely made possible by the impressive nature of Plath's body of work" (15). While Plath herself was adamant that "personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience" and must be "generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on," she implicitly licenced biographical readings by acknowledging that her poems "come immediately out of the

senseless and emotional experience I have" (qtd. in Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath" 64).

Moses evokes this tension between the general and the personal in the image that occurs to Sylvia to describe her breast milk leaking into the bathwater: "a tiny Hiroshima as it penetrated the surface," dissolving into "spreading grayish lacework" (16). Just as Alvarez accused Plath, in an early draft of "Lady Lazarus," of "trying to hitch an easy lift by dragging in the atomic victims" (*Savage God* 32), the introjection of historical event into personal experience arguably denudes the atrocity of the event described.

Nevertheless, the image heralds a new and different kind of biographical reading to that criticised by Brain, one that is attentive to Plath's commitment to engaging her lived experience as a female body with events of international significance. Moses's emphasis on productive, open-ended biographical readings reopens interpretative avenues closed down in the 1970s, when the publication of Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* effectively discredited the biographical. Far from suggesting that Plath was "too unimaginative to make anything up" (Brain, "Dangerous Confessions" 28), *Wintering* troubles the distinction between lived and narrated experience, suggesting that Plath used her writing to imagine a future as much as to record a past.

This revised understanding of the autobiographical is evident in the

passage describing the arrangement of the *Ariel* poems:

She knows the story she wants them to tell. It is her story. It is where she wills herself to go; it is an incantation. She's giving shape to her life, past and future, with these poems. Like the arrangement of cards in a Tarot deck as they are turned up, it is not just the poems but their relation to each other that matters. (10-11)

The depiction of *Ariel* as a kind of prophecy inverts the conventional dynamics governing biographical readings, while Sylvia's emphasis on the ordering of the poems is a moment of skilful ventriloquism on Moses's part, allowing the subject to lend her voice to the call for a Restored Edition. These twinned concerns with writing as prolepsis and with the importance of poetic sequencing converge in the chapter detailing the composition of *Ariel*'s eponymous poem. This chapter functions as a synecdoche for Moses's attitude to *Ariel* as a whole. Its effect is reliant on pagination and sequencing, thereby demonstrating what thus far has been merely stated: that the organisation of *Ariel* was as fundamental to its character as its content.



The chapter is dated 29 October 1962, Plath's thirtieth birthday, and takes as its starting point her introduction to "Ariel" for the BBC. With the enigmatic reserve typical of her introductions, she described the piece as "another horseback riding poem," named in honour of a mount that she was "especially fond of" ("New Poems" 194). While citing Sylvia's grandiose plans of riding to the highest point of Dartmoor, "arriving with the sun on . . . the morning of her rebirth: the start of another life" (*Wintering* 156), Moses emphasises the prosaic details of a novice rider hacking out on an elderly horse, occupied with the beginners' litany of "*heels down, toes up, weight on stirrups*" (159). The horse herself, recently "*dozing in oak straw and crumbly fresh manure*" is a pathetic counterpart to the "God's lioness" of the poem, emphasising Sylvia's imaginative transformation of lived experience into verse (154). When lines and images from the finished poem "occur" to Sylvia as she rides, they appear in an altered form suggestive of a previous draft. Her vision of "stripping off expectations, the dead rules, the hands of all who would hold her back" (165) is a looser, more discursive version of "White / Godiva, I unpeel-- / Dead hands, dead stringencies" (l.19-21), while her self-image as an "arrow . . . come through a *kesselschlaft*, a burning cauldron of hell" (158) rehearses the poem's climactic "drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning" (l.26-8). These paraphrased images resist Hughes's construction of Plath as a

poet of "effortless inspiration" whose wording "arrive[s], wherever it arrives, fully-formed" ("Sheep in Fog" 211). They favour Alvarez's emphasis on her "hard-earned skills and discipline," whose poems may have "flowed effortlessly," but who still "rewrote and rewrote" (*The Savage God* 36). Whereas Hughes's suggestion that the *Ariel* poems effectively wrote themselves has the effect of de-skilling Plath, Moses's prioritising of the craftswoman over the visionary grants her full ownership of the finished poem.

In light of these subtleties, the penultimate paragraph of the "Ariel" chapter feels both reductive and redundant, transforming the poem's climax into a lived experience that Sylvia has only to transcribe:

Ariel rears. Sylvia lets her go, striking off in a bounding canter, a gallop, all four feet in the air at once, momentum snatching her, propelling her forward. The rush, the drive, the *muscular inevitability* of it, the *throb of the horse's motion under her too late to stop*, her body lit, sparking at every nerve, flying - her body, this *heedless pounding speed*. She believes in what she feels. She belongs to no one. (167; emphasis added)

Unlike the previous details, this paragraph rehearses both the narrative of *Ariel*, and also its symbolic emphasis. It effectively denies Plath's literary authority, suggesting that both the events of the poem and their sexualised inflection were experienced rather than imagined. Yet the implausibility of a rider of two-months' experience attaining "this heedless pounding speed" is explained over the page, in a passage that works to frame the previous climax as illusory:

She is thirty years old.  
She is sitting at her desk,  
her toes buried in the  
red wool plush of an  
Oriental rug, a cup of hot  
black coffee smoking at  
her wrist. *Free*. Daylight  
rises like a curtain  
beyond the curtains of  
her study. Her children  
sigh in their sleep, stir  
under their blankets, in  
the room beyond the  
wall. A purple dawn, a  
toppled graveyard, a  
vision she bows her head  
before. Blue cornflowers,  
red poppies mouth her  
name, cascade across  
the stage at her feet.  
(168)

Having constructed the pinnacle of Sylvia's vision from a perspective of complete immersion, Moses pans back to reveal its mundane foundations. The "cauldron of morning" was "a cup of black coffee," the "red Eye" suggested by the rug

and the poppies; Ariel's gallop, by, implication, was not experienced but imagined. This is confirmed in a subsequent chapter, "Poppies in October," in which Sylvia recalls her birthday flowers, "their truth in her cells, pumping through her veins," and struggles to accept that they had "only been flowers, not what she had made of them" (205). Moses's biographical reading thus places the utmost emphasis on the symbolic play of Sylvia's imagination. The imagistic resonance between "her children stir in their sleep, in the room beyond the wall" and "the child's cry / Melts in the wall" then transcends the boundaries of the text to inform a reading of "Ariel" itself. It situates the speaker in a similar position to Sylvia, seated at a desk rather than on horseback, her children in the next room (Clark 105). This conclusively emphasises the metaliterary over the biographical, framing "Ariel" as "a comment upon the imaginative ascent engendered by poetic inspiration" (Clark 103), less about riding than about writing.

Moses's exploitation of pagination and sequencing to effect this revelation symbolises her belief that the arrangement of *Ariel* was key to Plath's attempt at "imagining a future" ("Lioness"):

Her book begins with  
'love'. It ends with  
'spring'. The bees will fly  
from their combs past  
winter, housekeeping at  
the door of the hive,  
sipping the roses. The

hellebore, the snow rose,  
will bloom out of the  
darkest months - the  
legend of a simple faith.  
(326-7)

The declarative structure of this passage offers an optimistic answer to the questions posed by Plath in the final stanza of "Wintering":

Will the hive survive, will  
the gladiolas  
Succeed in the banking  
their fires  
To enter another year?  
What will they taste of,  
the Christmas roses?  
(l.46-9)

Building on the hope contained in the final line of the manuscript, "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (l.50), Moses suggests that Plath used *Ariel's* trajectory to envisage a future at Court Green and a marital reconciliation. In *Sylvia*, a similar ending is imagined, with Paltrow telling Craig that "in the summer we should go back to Devon. . . The summer, and the fall, and this goddamn winter, it'll all fade and by the time the leaves are out it'll just seem like some terrible nightmare that we finally woke out of" (Brownlow 105). Just as, in the biopic, the reader knows that Sylvia's dreams will founder even before it transpires that Assia Wevill is pregnant, Moses must find a way of balancing Sylvia's faith in the narrative of *Ariel* with the reader's foreknowledge of her "ultimate fate" ("Baking"). She again uses her text's internal structure to hold these

conflicting elements in harmony, while reaching beyond the thresholds of her text to engage in dialogue with *Birthday Lettters*.

In the poem "Robbing Myself," Hughes describes how he returned to Court Green midwinter to retrieve for Plath the potatoes and apples that appear to offer futurity and reconciliation. The potatoes are "the eggs of my coming year" (l.17), the apples "spring prayers" (l.24); together they promise a "summer intact in spite of everything" (l.25). Like a ghostly visitant, Hughes walks the floors of the house, cataloguing the furniture that "waited only for us" (l.40), and describes how, before leaving,

I peered awhile, as  
through the keyhole,  
Into my darkened,  
hushed, safe casket  
From which (I did not  
know)  
I had already lost the  
treasure.  
(l.58-61)

There is the sense, then, that in following Plath's instructions and harvesting their crops, Hughes has unwittingly "robbed himself," has disturbed the talismanic reminders of the couple's intended future. In *Wintering*, Moses offers a prose summary of the poem, in which Ted retrieves not only the apples, potatoes, and curtain material requested, but also "all of this honey; there was no telling when she might

get back." Like his counterpart in "Robbing Myself," he "withdraws from the house and turns his key, leaving the cellar empty" (324).

The significance of this moment becomes apparent two chapters hence, in which Sylvia stakes her hopes for the future in the "six jars of honey" described in "Wintering" (l.4):

[O]ne she'd already used; Ted, if he's remembered it, should have one in his custody this minute at Montagu Square. The last four are in the wine cellar: the tangible promise of her return to springtime. Four more jars - four months left until she plans to go home. A jar for each of them: herself, Ted, Frieda, Nicholas. Her honey is waiting for her, for all of them, at Court Green. Her hive would make it through winter's dumb chill, enough honey to last until spring, hoarded, secreted away. A hope she can cling to, shimmering in the dark of the cellar.  
(332-3)

Unaware that Ted has removed not one, but all five jars of honey, Sylvia is placed in the position of Hughes in "Robbing Myself," peering into a "casket" from which the "treasure"

has already been taken. Moses's intertextual engagement thus complements her text's internal structure, allowing the reader to see through Sylvia's hopes that "her honey is waiting for . . . all of them at Court Green." It is a powerful moment, a synecdoche for our readerly awareness that her projected future can only be imagined.

Moses similarly uses poems from *Birthday Letters* to foreshadow and undermine the final paragraph of *Wintering*. In her penultimate chapter, she engages with Hughes's poem "The Inscription," which describes Plath's visit to Hughes's flat to receive "the missing supplies" (l.8). "Like the running animal that receives / The fatal bullet without a faltering check / In its stride" (l.44-6), Plath is superficially unaffected by the discovery of an *Oxford Shakespeare* inscribed by Wevill. However, it is painfully apparent that her redoubled pleas for assurance that "we shall sit together this summer / Under the laburnum" will come to naught in the face of Hughes's continuing affair (l.21-2). In a democratic gesture that does not demand foreknowledge of *Birthday Letters*, Moses paraphrases the poem, suggesting that Sylvia will be undone by "the letters swimming up from this replacement and its inscription. The anagram will read *you are ash*" (330).

This moment, narrated proleptically, serves to transform the novel's final paragraph from optimism into pathos. Walking to meet Ted, to retrieve what

she still believes to be a single jar of honey, and to attempt reconciliation, Sylvia

can imagine her family  
on the sand near  
Appledore, at the  
northern mouth of the  
Taw, the Atlantic sun  
edging her daughter, her  
son, and Ted in gold -  
their shoulders, the  
crowns of their heads -  
and the loud pounding  
and sighing of the  
waves. If she could stand  
where the sun stands,  
would they be fronted  
entirely in gold, their  
souls exposed? [...] And  
when they turn to her,  
carrying shells and  
pebbles to her, running  
ahead of the foaming  
waves, they are still  
golden in the late light.

Snowflakes catch in her  
eyelashes at each step.  
There is no more  
waiting. It's here. Here,  
now, her moment of  
truth. And it falls like  
grace, only for her.  
(334)

The imagistic emphasis on the play of the sun echoes Hughes's poem "Perfect Light," which recreates a poignant photograph of Plath, Frieda, and Nicholas at Court Green, "your only April on earth / Among your daffodils" (l.6-7). Moses's dialogue

with the poem is rendered explicit in an earlier description of the photograph's composition, in her direct quotation of the phrase "perfect light" (229), and in her reference to "an ancient moated mound" (50). Her use of prolepsis and engagement with "The Inscription" loads her final paragraph with a weight of foresight equal to that described in "Perfect Light":

And the knowledge  
Inside the hill on which  
you are sitting,  
A moated fort hill,  
bigger than your house,  
Failed to reach the  
picture. While your next  
moment,  
Coming towards you like  
an infantryman  
Returning slowly out of  
no-man's land,  
Bowed under something,  
never reached you –  
Simply melted into the  
perfect light.  
(l.14-21)

We know that the wine cellar is stripped bare of honey, and that Sylvia's hopes for reconciliation will turn to "ash" in the face of Ted's ongoing infidelity. Such details are tokens of the wealth of contextual knowledge surrounding *Wintering*, as evident as Hughes's approaching infantryman. In short, there is an irresolvable tension, acknowledged by Moses, between "the story I was creating for my fictional Sylvia," and "the true story of Plath's life, the end

of which is all too well known" ("Baking"). *Wintering's* narrative structure and intertextual engagement foreground this context, emphasising that Sylvia's "moment of truth" is necessarily "only for her" (334). Yet the novel ends on a moment of infinite deferral, akin to the climax of Kate Clanchy's poem "Slattern":

. . . again  
and again I am walking  
up your road,  
that first time, bidden  
and wanted,  
the blossom on the  
trees, light,  
light and buoyant. *Pull  
yourself  
together*, they say, quite  
rightly,  
but she is stubborn, that  
girl,  
that hopeful one, still  
walking.  
(l.9-16)

The reader thus holds two moments in balance; Sylvia is doomed, but still hopeful, still walking.

Moses here creates a readerly effect not unlike that experienced when turning from Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* to the Restored Edition. As described by Matthews, Frieda Hughes's publication "restores not just Plath's original arrangement of her book, but also the presence of Hughes in the act of his earlier editorial rearrangement of it – the very act that necessitates a restoration" (91). For while *The Restored Edition*

may have "reinstat[ed] [Plath's] original selection and arrangement" (cover), the collection read very differently as a "restored" text in 2004 than it would have as an "original" edition in 1965. In its hinterland is Hughes's *Ariel* and its associations with Plath's death, which the Restored Edition's optimism can never fully unwrite. By ending on a note of plurality, which unites the hopefulness of the Bee sequence with the retrospective knowledge that informed Hughes's later additions, *Wintering* summons not only Plath's original arrangement, but also the doubled gaze necessary to comprehend it.

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In drawing this article to a conclusion, it is useful to revisit Frieda's Hughes's opposition between contemporary writers' attempts to "breathe life" into Plath, and Plath's own words, which, Hughes claimed, "describe her best" (xvii). Hughes's statement situates Brownlow and Moses's attempts at resuscitation as a harmful distraction from the 'real business' of attending critically to Plath's textual corpus. This corpus will, in "describ[ing] her best," lead to a truer representation of Plath than biofiction or the biopic can hope to offer. Hughes's statement was, ironically, echoed by Moses, one of her most prominent detractors. Shortly after the publication of *Wintering*, Moses acknowledged that "all secondary Plathian roads, whether biographical or critical or fictional or celluloid, will lead surely and

inevitably back to the genuine article" ("Whose Plath"). Hughes's and Moses's statements reflect the ideology that, as Badia has demonstrated, governs "the vast majority of Plath scholarship that is published today." Situated in direct opposition to biographical reading practices, "this ideology insists that the only responsible way to discuss Plath is through a close reading and explication of her literary texts" (Badia 16).

This is problematic for the simple reason that the only *Ariel* available in 2003 was not the "genuine article," but was Ted Hughes's own highly personal orchestration of Plath's body of poems. *Sylvia* and *Wintering* do not, then, force Plath's life into an unproductive engagement with her untarnished text. Rather, they engage the life with the text *differently*, and in such a way as to resist the dominant narrative established by Ted Hughes. Both refuse the connection, implicit in Hughes's arrangement of *Ariel* and confirmed in *Birthday Letters*, between Plath's writing and her death. Jeffs and Brownlow achieve this by prioritising the Bee sequence as Plath's final word, and Moses by attributing Plath's late poems to a separate cycle, and advocating a physiological, rather than a literary explanation for the death she refuses to describe. In place of Hughes's version, both prioritise Plath's own arrangement of her poems, revealing what Moses calls the "woman's story, not the man's" (*Wintering* 193). Gilbert writes that the revelation of her

original sequencing allows us to "(re)imagin[e] a Plath who might have been, in some part of herself, more reliant on the fabled Power of Positive Thinking that her reputation as a suicidal depressive would suggest (3). While glib, Gilbert's statement encapsulates how these creative interventions add to our understanding of Plath, balancing Ted Hughes's image of a poet whose art foreshadowed her death against the image of a poet who used her art to imagine a way through the difficulties of her life.

In situating *Ariel* as the template for, rather than the record of a life, Moses inverts the conventional dynamics governing biographical readings. This intervention is paralleled on a broader level by both texts' subversion of the relationship of the original to the copy. In adding their voices to the call for a restoration of Plath's manuscript, both *Sylvia* and *Wintering* helped, on some level, to call their original into being, demonstrating that biographical readings may have a positive, in this case a creative, impact on the text. For Hagström, Frieda Hughes's *Restored Edition*, "with an preface . . . loyally defending her father's choices," was a straightforward corrective to Moses's focus on "[Ted] Hughes's much-criticised editing of Plath's texts" (51). Such a teleology was resisted by Hughes herself, who claimed that it was an editor at Harper Collins who "first suggested that my mother's original arrangement of poems might make a good book" (qtd. in Badia,

162). Yet as Badia observes, Hughes thus unwrites the contributions of Perloff, Bundtzen, and all of the intervening scholars who “demonstrated so powerfully not simply an interest in but a need for a restored edition” (Badia 162). At the time of publication, *Sylvia, Wintering* and their accompanying commentaries were the latest manifestation of this ongoing need. Renewing popular attention to debates first articulated in the 1980s, they should rightly be understood as a catalyst, if not a cause for the *Restored Edition*.

Yet the restoration of Plath’s “original selection and arrangement” still does not constitute the “genuine article,” which must remain, for two important reasons, an irresolvable loss. Firstly, as Matthews has implied, the need for a Restored Edition was generated by the same editorial interventions – Ted Hughes’s – that it set out to unwrite, making Hughes “more present than ever” in the reconstructed text (91).

Secondly, in anticipating the publication of the Restored Edition, Jeffs and Moses inflect its reading in subtly pervasive ways. To cite just one example, Moses’s suggestion that Plath viewed *Ariel* as a prophecy has the potential, as Brain writes in another context, to “solidif[y] into an absolute truth through which that text can be understood (Brain, “Dangerous Confessions” 22). Yet the same is true of any reading: of Frieda Hughes’s suggestion that *Ariel* unearthed “everything that must be shed in order to move on” (xii), and of Ted Hughes’s assertion, in *Birthday Letters*, that the manuscript “sucked the oxygen out of both of us” (“Suttee” l.83). In the end, then, it comes down to this: how do we want *Ariel* to be remembered? “Perfected,” like its creator, a synecdoche for “her dead body” (“Edge” l.1-2) – or soaring “over the engine that killed her” (“Stings” l.59)? Each version, as Frieda Hughes writes, “has its own significance, though the two histories are one” (xvii).

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# Animal Trapping Exercise:

## An Introduction to PLATH/HUGHES

by Robert Eric Shoemaker

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I have always imagined— not known for a fact, but felt deeply— that the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes has been misunderstood. Judgments of these two writers exist in academics and in the public more than in historical account; there's plenty of factual information out there, but as information goes in literary circles it is tinged with personal resentment, or self-flattery and self-forgiveness (like some of Hughes's writing on the subject, other than *Birthday Letters*), or is buried in such a mire of every other variety of critical bias that no "personal" evaluation can be made. Those lucky enough to have known the poets in their lifetimes have especially slant perspectives on what they were like together, as would be expected, and these are the biographies most readers see. I remember connecting with Anne Stevenson and Jillian Becker to speak about their biographical work on Plath and being astounded by the sheer amount of latitude that every factoid, every story about events in the poets' lives, could move along— sometimes within one sentence. Stevenson told me, "We have had quite enough...of 'The Ted and Sylvia Show,'" as if to say that we, admirers of poetry or academics interested in storytelling, heard and always have heard the "whole story". All of it, through and through, no embellishment, just facts, and/or need hear nothing else. But of course, we've only heard fragments, fractals all making up the larger crystalline structure that is "Plath/Hughes", that can never be explained by the view through one small window on Court Green.

I want to clarify, in the event that Stevenson or an admirer were to read this, that I do believe the family and friends of these writers are owed peace and that no amount of curiosity should be satisfied by constantly annoying living relatives in the name of biography. I'll also say that a few biographies stand out of the heap, including Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, which reviews extant biographies and evidence to interrogate biography as a form and not fact. However all I've seen of the accounts based on "true" stories— the film by Christine Jeffs, the countless number of Plath critiques that despise Hughes without question— retain the same reductive qualities (some might say, "what more can you expect").

As happens with celebrity, rumors and facts have blended together and crafted a new narrative of the Plath and Hughes lives, especially during their married years. As a writer myself, and a skeptical academic, I quickly became obsessed with narrative *truth* regarding these poets, a nonexistent quality in biographical writing but a quality that readers expect, that viewers of biopics assume to some extent, and I wanted to try my hand at a different version of truth concerning the mentally ill or “troubled” writer, the abusive narcissistic poet, the impossibly famous “power couple,” and all they represent between these poles. Why not piece together an assemblage of facts (dates, locations, quotes) and start afresh, looking on the couple as *people* and not as literary giants or idols? Why not redefine readers’ ideas of their “truth”, meta-biographically, as Malcolm did in *The Silent Woman*?

Hughes explained the concept of “trapping” a poem as you would trap an animal in his book *Poetry Is*. The “truth” is the rarest of animals. You have to “know it, track it, smell its dung”, as Hughes would say, and this elusive Truth-Animal has no known cave, but thousands upon thousands of networked passages burrowing beneath the surface of ground that “most people” see (or read). I made my own truth-trap, brought my friends to watch and to make bird-calls with me, and we set out to release whatever we caught onto the stage.

The conception of this musical trap happened during a conversation between myself and Abigail Pershing, the originator of many of the compositions that form up the score of the musical/biopic/poem “PLATH/HUGHES”. Abby and I had been reading Ted Hughes during undergrad after figuring out (what else) that he’d been married to the Sylvia Plath. I knew very little about him, had read Plath since I was young (I remember reading *The Bell Jar* by the pool at my uncle’s house, can easily imagine my sweat falling between the pages). Plath’s poetry had never really interested me, since “confessional writing” had always struck me as self-indulgent, though I now know that’s a ham-handed description of her work. After reading, as we walked down 57<sup>th</sup> street in Hyde Park, Chicago, Abby and I discussed what we’d learned. I remember standing across from Powell’s Books when I said something to the effect of, “Their writing is so melodic. It’s so musical,” and after a moment considering the implications of a theater major using the word “musical” in this context, we both laughed. What an idea, a musical about Sylvia Plath, her marriage, her death. How grotesque.

The more we talked, the more ridiculous it became. One song for the oven? No. Who would come see a show that delighted in morbidity? At that point, no matter, we were rolling with the idea, as we so often did when we talked something up for too long. I went home that night to my broken-down keyboard and began to compose a song

based on *The Bell Jar*. It became the first of many nights banging out melodies with my untrained fingers.

It became apparent that not only was this idea completely absurd, it was interesting and perhaps would become a watchable play. As far as I knew at the time, relatively few (if any) artists had made work responding with an even keel to *both* sides of the marriage "Plath/Hughes". No one had used the stage to describe both people as completely and utterly people, and flawed, leaving out any soapboxes, creating no container for Sylvia to snare her husband in with her "craziness" - their marriage must have been much like every marriage, filled with pain and laughter, confusion, heartbreak, trouble, and thank god, poetry.

Several years later, several productions in, I feel the same as I have done. The purpose of writing this play is and always has been to provide a unique and less biased lens to view the couple through. This is nearly impossible, which may be why I'm always revising the thing. However, those who have worked on this play and been with me throughout its development have seen the beauty behind the mess of Ted and Sylvia. Abby, Justin, Alexandra, Brett, and our watchful friend Nikolai became so attached, like me, to the idea of an unbiased narrative biography that they stuck with me over the course of four or five years, during which Alexandra and Justin became experts and conduits of Sylvia and Ted, respectively. They occasionally call me to ask if we're producing "PLATH/HUGHES" again, and whether they tell me it's because of the play's writing or not, I know the real allure is in the impossibility of truth and the desire for evenhandedness. The play has taught us to see both sides of a story and to deliver that story with cracks running through it, as many as possible, to get a glimpse of the signified beneath the narrative sign. Without realizing it at first, this play has come to represent the best and the worst of both poets, as well as the tangled spectrum that is marriage, that is storytelling, that is human perspective.

-R.E.S.



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**TED HUGHES**, poet of England

**THE SET**

Photographs of Ted and Sylvia are used to indicate various settings. These flash up around the set as indicated. Ted's soliloquies are meant to take place over Sylvia's grave, or in reference to it. The set is littered with various papers and writings. In the first production of PLATH/HUGHES, the set was mutable and crafted with different shapes of cubes. Projections were used to indicate time and place, and sound was crafted as ambient noise interspersed with poetry.

**PERFORMANCE HISTORY**

This musical was developed with support from the University of Chicago theatre community, and I will always be grateful for this. This began as a workshop musical with only four songs as part of New Work Week with University Theater. I expanded the piece and we moved to the Rhinoceros Festival with Curious Theatre Branch in Chicago, thanks to Stefan Brun and the company's support. We had a concert performance after this back at UChicago. The group self-produced the musical at Gorilla Tango Theater in fall of 2014. This show was remounted by Poetry Is Productions as part of the Chicago Musical Theatre Festival in 2015. For this group, the last production was in New York at Teatro LATEA in 2016.

Original Core Team Members:

**Alexandra Mathews** as SYLVIA PLATH, poetess of America  
**Justin Krivda** as TED HUGHES, poet of England  
**Nikolai Maximay**, composer and pianist  
**Robert Eric Shoemaker**, director, writer, and producer  
**Brett Pepowski**, stage manager  
**Abigail Pershing**, composer

# PLATH/HUGHES

by Robert Eric Shoemaker

---

*Beginning at the end of Act One.*

TED

We traveled all over America. Happily, unhappily, testing our love. We saw the great places where the spirit of the land lived, and we found our own spirits slipping away with every canyon and cliff. Until Yaddo. Yaddo was a place of great serenity, full of the power to revive us.

\*YADDO ARTIST COLONY\*

TED and SYLVIA sit on a bridge. They stare at the stream beneath.

TED

Yaddo was the quietest place we had ever been. You and I had the quietest time to ourselves—

SYLVIA

Shh!

TED

(Quieter)

I hardly knew how to contain myself. I finally felt at one with you, in the wilderness. I felt that we could move with the same grace we used to, with the idea of love we meant to keep between us.

SYLVIA

Ted, be quiet!

"YADDO" begins.

TED

QUERY: HAVE YOU SEEN A MORE BEAUTIFUL MORNING?

HAVE YOU? HAVE YOU?  
QUERY: WHY DON'T I EVER SEE YOU THIS HAPPY?  
WHY NOT?

SYLVIA

Ted...

TED

WHY NOT?

SYLVIA

QUESTION: DO YOU EVER LOOK FOR MORE THAN CRAZY?  
DO YOU? DO YOU?

TED & SYLVIA

(Distant)

WHY THEN DO I FEEL LIKE WE'VE LOST OUR CONNECTION?  
WHY THEN? WHY NOW?  
YADDO FALL, RAIN IN FALL—  
PREGNANT! YOU AND I ARE PREGNANT!  
QUESTION: ABOUT THE NEW ADDENDUM,  
ARE WE READY FOR THE LEAP AND FALL?  
YADDO.

TED and SYLVIA take separate walks.

TED

OUT HERE I FEEL I COULD BE A BRAND NEW HUSBAND!  
MARRIAGE...I DO!

SYLVIA

OUT HERE POETRY FLOWS FROM ME LIKE MY LIFE-BLOOD!  
PUBLISH...I CAN!

TED and SYLVIA flirt.

TED & SYLVIA

COURT GREEN; MAYBE THERE WE CAN BE JUST AS HAPPY.  
CAN WE? WE'LL TRY!

YADDO FALL, BABY DOLL.  
BABY! WE'RE GONNA HAVE A BABY!  
QUESTION: ABOUT THE LOSS OF MAYBE  
LET'S BE CAUTIOUS LEST WE TRIP AND FALL!  
BABY.  
YADDO.

NIGHTMARES SYLVIA

NO MORE TED

NIGHTMARES SYLVIA

NO MORE TED

SHADOWS SYLVIA

BABY'S TED

TED & SYLVIA  
COMING, WE CAN MAKE IT IF OUR POETRY REMINDS US WHY WE CAME  
TO  
YADDO.  
MARRIAGE.  
BABY.  
CAN WE?

TED is alone, reaching out to  
SYLVIA.

End of ACT ONE.

ACT TWO.

\*YADDO\*

"Yaddo Reprise/Act Two Overture."

TED and SYLVIA lie beneath the stars at Yaddo.

TED

Do you suppose that, if one were to keep digging, one could create a volcano?

SYLVIA

By digging to the core of the earth?

TED

Yes, or at least to the mantle.

SYLVIA

(Almost seriously)

I suppose, if one could stand the heat.

TED

(Seriously considering it)

Hmm.

(Pause.)

SYLVIA

What's your favorite constellation?

TED

Cancer.

SYLVIA

Really, Ted, you can't possibly like a crab the most.

TED

I suppose Aries.

SYLVIA

I like Gemini. The twins. It's a sign that two people complete each other, become one.

TED smiles. SYLVIA sits up.

Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother.

TED

Did she have wings? She'd be better with wings.

SYLVIA

How can one get better than Marilyn Monroe?

TED

Good question.

SYLVIA

She spoke to me as if we were close friends, and I oohed and aahed over her, telling her how important she and her husband were to me, as artists—

TED

Artists?

SYLVIA

Can you argue that Arthur Miller is not an artist? Or that Marilyn's acting is not art?

TED

It's pornography.

SYLVIA

Stop bellyaching, Ted, you enjoy Marilyn! Now they're a power couple.

(Pause.)

She wanted to grant me a wish, Ted.

TED

What would you wish for?

SYLVIA

That we could stay like this, here at Yaddo, forever.

TED

Can't we be like this elsewhere?

SYLVIA

(Silence.)

\*HOSPITAL\*

TED

The air at Yaddo was clean enough for angels- you said it yourself. Our first child, an angel herself, came, but we were not destined for that forever. The stars had written another pattern for us, and for you it involved a mother's pain, personal grief that I shared with you as we struggled to fight against the bestial giant that was America.

SYLVIA in hospital, TED beside her.

TED

Can I get you anything?

(Silence.)

SYLVIA

I was so close.

TED

We can try again.

SYLVIA

Why should we try again? Isn't this a sign, like you're always saying, that we shouldn't?

TED

Shouldn't what?

SYLVIA

Ted, I want this to work more than you do. I know that—

TED

How can you—

SYLVIA

Let me finish. I want this to work more than you do because I want to be a mother more than you want to be a father. I have always wanted to be a mother, I have ached in my bones to be one, but you have your poetry and it comforts you. I want to be whole again.



TED

Let me complete you.

SYLVIA

You do, Ted. We are two and one.

TED

What more is there?

(Beat.)

I'll go get the nurse, maybe she can add some painkillers—

SYLVIA

I'm fine, Ted. Check on Frieda.

TED

Don't act strong, Sylvia—

SYLVIA

I'm not acting.

SYLVIA looks out the window, writing a letter. TED watches mournfully.  
"FROM SIVVY" begins

SYLVIA

A CHILD'S CRY THAT NEEDS YOU IN THE DARKEST NIGHT  
A CHILD'S TEAR BRINGS YOU DOWN TO ALL YOU FEAR  
TO WRITE A LETTER TO A CHILD, TO TRY MY HAND OF RISING VOWELS  
DEAR FRIEDA, FROM SIVVY, FROM MUMMY  
DEAR FRIEDA, TRUST NO MEN.  
DEAR FRIEDA, COLOR EYES, DUCKS IN FLIGHT!  
YOU ALWAYS WERE MY SECRET WANT  
BETRAY NO FRIEND, BECOME NO MAID  
AND KEEP TO HEART ALL THAT YOU'VE MADE  
DEAR FRIEDA, FROM SIVVY, YOUR MUMMY  
DEAR NICKY, BE STRONG LIKE TED, REMEMBER ALL THE THINGS HE'S SAID,  
BUT DON'T LET PASSIONS RUN AWAY  
AND LOSE YOURSELF ALONG THE WAY—

DEAR NICKY, FROM SIVVY, YOUR MUMMY  
DEAR CHILDREN...  
TO WRITE A LETTER TO A CHILD TO KEEP THEM STRONG—  
A CHILD'S TEAR...THEY HEAR ALL THAT YOU SAY.

(Belted.)

YOUR EYES ARE THE ONE NICE THING TO ME!  
YOUR HEART, SO YOUNG, BUT SO FULL OF RHYME!

(Mourning.)

GIVE ME THE STRENGTH TO SEE THEM GROW!  
DEAR FATHER,  
DEAR MOTHER...  
IF THERE'S A GOD—  
DON'T LET THEM BE LIKE ME. SIVVY.

\*ENGLAND, COURT GREEN\*

TED and SYLVIA move into the Hughes family home at Court Green, which is full of dark, boding energy. TED breathes the fresh air. SYLVIA tries to clean the room.

TED  
(Happy to be elsewhere)

Nothing like American air.

SYLVIA  
(Not happy to be here)

Nothing like Devon air...

TED

Clears the head.

SYLVIA turns away.

Better than London air, too.

SYLVIA

Where's the cat?

TED

Probably chasing down a mouse. Wild things live here.

SYLVIA looks uncomfortable with this statement.

SYLVIA

I need to sweep out the house, it's been so long since someone's been here. What are you going to do?

TED

I need to write, I feel the necessity pressing upon me from the earth, from the air!

SYLVIA mocks TED behind his back.  
TED begins to leave.

SYLVIA

Help me first?

TED

I'll be back shortly, I promise. What shall we have for dinner?

SYLVIA

Something...wild?

TED

Deer!

SYLVIA  
(Misunderstanding)

Yes?

TED  
(Laughing)

No, Sylvia— venison, deer meat.

SYLVIA  
(Not laughing)

...Do we have that?

TED

In the icebox.

SYLVIA  
(Falsely)

Somehow, I love cooking for you!

SYLVIA pulls out a bottle and downs her pills.

TED

You began taking your pills like life depended upon it. And to some extent, it did. Normal life depended on your stability. Stable in a way.

SYLVIA goes out of the room.

TED

We proved that the country was our natural habitat. We were like two birds come home to roost, our nest full of feathers and little chicks; Frieda was first, on April Fools' Day— you thought that was an omen. You had no friends to call on, for a time. But then it seemed that things began to pick up.

SYLVIA, ecstatic, reenters with a letter.

SYLVIA

Oh, Ted! The Colossus! The Colossus!

TED

What?

SYLVIA

The Colossus!

TED

Really?

SYLVIA

I'm a poet!

TED

A published poetess!

SYLVIA

Poetess!

TED and SYLVIA embrace. A child  
begins to cry offstage.

TED

There's the pup again.

SYLVIA

Did you catch anything?

TED

Fish.

SYLVIA

What a wonderful, good day.

TED  
(Correcting)

A particularly good day.

SYLVIA

Yes.

TED

One of us should quiet the child.

SYLVIA  
(Smiling...)

I'll go, I'll go.

SYLVIA heads off, then stops.

SYLVIA  
(Seriously)

A witch lives near us, you know.

TED

The Witch of Devon.

SYLVIA

She's probably put a hex on the baby, made her cry.

TED

Not our Frieda!

SYLVIA

Have you seen her? The Witch?

TED

I haven't been over that way.

SYLVIA

Have you seen anyone recently?

TED

Hardly a soul.

SYLVIA

Yes.

SYLVIA goes to the living room.

"Bell Jar Reprise" begins.

SYLVIA stares out the window. SYLVIA picks up the phone and the baby stops crying. TED observes sadly.

SYLVIA  
(Steadily losing faith)

Hello, darling Mummy. How are you doing? Ted is fine. He's probably the most brilliant, understanding man in the whole world...I wish I could bring him home to a big barbeque and invite all the neighbors, and Mrs. Prouty, Dr. Beuscher... all of them. Of course I'm all right, emphatically so! I think, Mummy, I've never been so calm and peaceful and happy in all my life. If it is always this way: me studying, having to work, and him so mature and experienced in the world, in writing... how incredible to fight out a life. Side by side.

SYLVIA lets the phone drop. She wrings her hands. She picks up the phone. She hesitates. She dials.

SYLVIA

Is this the BBC? Hello, um, I'm calling in reference to an interview you are conducting today— or were to have conducted by now. Yes, I understand, but can you at least tell me if Ted Hughes has come back from his interview? Did he come in at all? I'm his wife, I'm...Mrs. Hughes. Yes. Thank you. Has he been in? A tall what? I see. And they haven't come back yet, together or separately? I see. Thank you.

SYLVIA violently hangs up the phone. She quivers. She struggles to the typewriter and sits. She begins to type, but pulls out the paper and crumples it up. She throws it on the ground. She sweeps the rest of the papers from the writing desk and begins throwing things around the room. In a rage, she ravishes the desk, throwing TED's poems and papers everywhere. The child begins crying offstage. Everything is on the floor. SYLVIA quivers in place, then slumps at the desk. The door opens. TED enters.

TED  
(Blasé)

I told you I'd be home late.

SYLVIA is enraged.

SYLVIA

You KNOW WHY I'M MAD! I'm right! I'm RIGHT because you know!

TED

Have you *gone* mad?

SYLVIA

Don't ask me that question, don't you use that tone with me you cheap, cheating coward!

TED

What? What have you done to my manuscripts?

SYLVIA

You and your looseness with words, your suaveness!

TED

What are you talking about? Have you taken your medicine?

TED begins to pick up the papers.

SYLVIA

That's your solution for everything! Drug the crazy woman up!

TED

Be fair, Sylvia!

SYLVIA

Fair?! How was she, Ted?

TED

You have to take your medicine to be well!

TED

Who?

(Beat.)

Who are we talking about?

SYLVIA

Your tall drink of water, Ted, your new inspiration!



"He has found a woman with such wit and looks  
He can brag of her in any company."

TED

That's about you!

SYLVIA

Bullshit.

TED

Watch it!

SYLVIA

I'm watching. I've been watching you and listening to you talk about your precious  
radio series. And your theories!

TED

What do theories have to do with this?

SYLVIA  
(Suddenly sober)

What is a poem, Ted?

TED  
(Hesitant)

A poem is an animal.

SYLVIA

And how do you catch an animal, Ted?

TED

Quit saying my name.

SYLVIA

Answer me.

TED

With a trap.

SYLVIA

Or bare hands!

TED

Why are my manuscripts all over the floor, Sylvia?!

SYLVIA

I tried to catch them, Ted. I chased them into the forest, and I came out clean as silk and I caught one, squirming in my hand. A thought fox.

TED

A dream.

SYLVIA

I made that fox pup squeal.

TED

You're not thinking clearly, the planets must be aligned, or something—

SYLVIA

My mind is clearer than it has been in weeks.

TED

Would you go stop that child's bellowing!

SYLVIA

You do it!

TED

I'm cleaning up your mess!

SYLVIA

They've heard me scream. Where were you, Ted?

TED

(Into SYLVIA's face)

I told you, I was at the BBC!

The child stops screaming.

SYLVIA

I will make that fox pup squeal.

TED ages immensely, for a moment.

TED

You slipped into the void. I didn't know how to help. I never knew what to say to keep you calm. So again, I ran. Where you wouldn't find me. I was afraid. We knew it was ending, but we clung to our previous images of one another. The ones we held deep inside that quivered to the surface, like ripples. I hid; you took on more chores. You made crafts in your solitude. You took on bees. Your father bloomed in you like a bad anther.

"AZALEA, DAFFODIL REPRISE" begins.

TED

AZALEA, DAFFODIL,  
BREATHING WATER, STAYING STILL,  
STEPS AWAY FROM PARADISE!  
FIREFLOWER DIMMING NOW,  
YOUR SAPPHIRES BURNING IN THE NIGHT,  
NEVER MORE THAN A STEP FROM PARADISE

TED tries to pull SYLVIA back to reality.

TED

AZALEA,

SYLVIA

DAFFODIL,

TED & SYLVIA

BREATHING WATER, STAYING STILL,  
STEPS AWAY FROM PARADISE!  
FIREFLOWER DIMMING NOW,  
YOUR SAPPHIRES BURNING IN THE NIGHT,  
NEVER MORE THAN A STEP FROM PARADISE!

SYLVIA tends to her rag rug as TED  
observes her.

TED  
(Begging, a capella)

AZALEA, my daffodil,  
DROWNING SLOWLY, BURNING OUT,  
STEPS AWAY FROM PARADISE!  
I BURN INSIDE TO SOOTHE YOUR TEARS,  
OH, SYLVIA, WITH YOU I AM  
NEVER MORE THAN A STEP FROM PARADISE!

*Plath Profiles*

# Translation



# Editor's Note On Translation

by Robert Eric Shoemaker, Poetry Editor

---

"Wishful thinking and early training in arithmetic have convinced a majority of people that there are such things as equals in the world."

Gregory Rabassa, "No Two Snowflakes Are Alike"

This quote haunts me; every time I think of translation and picture explaining the art and impossibility of it, this comes to mind. Rabassa's arithmetic metaphor fits well in that one plus one does not equal two in translation, but rather, there is the remainder of the "untranslatable," in Walter Benjamin's sense. However, there is *also* a logic and underlying science or arithmetic to translation when approximating relationships between words, as in a family tree etymologically, and so Rabassa's declaration on "equivalence" is a fraught critique of literal translation. It is hard to approach translation with anything but a logical mind approximating meanings from signs, but one must also abstract that approximation and turn a metaphor like the original poet, which begs the question relevant to our journal—can one approximate Sylvia Plath?

In the spirit of global experimentation, *Plath Profiles* has an interest in publishing new translations of Plath's work. What follows is one translation of a Plath poem, "Sheep in Fog," couched with critical engagement from the translator and the evaluator, both native speakers of Hindi. Our hope with this section is to encourage thinking into the crevasses of Plath's work that occur outside of English and to encourage more work like this. One can see that these two "Sheep" are not "alike" or "equals" as Rabassa puts it, but there is reason to believe their logics are relating.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *The Translation Studies Reader* edited by Lawrence Venuti, Routledge, 2002, 75-85.

Rabassa, Gregory. "No Two Snowflakes are Alike: Translation as Metaphor." *The Craft of Translation*, edited by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte, University of Chicago Press, 1989, 1-12.

### **Sheep In Fog**

The hills step off into whiteness.  
People or stars  
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

...

*Read the original poem in full online at [AllPoetry.com](http://AllPoetry.com)*

# कोहरे में भेड़

## Sheep in Fog

*translated by Smita Agarwal*

---

**By Sylvia Plath**

—सिल्विया प्लैथ

ये पहाड़ियाँ सफ़ेदी में उतर जाती हैं....  
लोग और तारे, मुझे उदास निगाहों से  
तकते हैं.... मैं उन्हें निराश करती हूँ।

रेल—गाड़ी, इक साँस की लकीर छोड़ती है।  
ओ ! धीमे  
घोड़े, जंग के रंग के,

खुर, मायूस घण्टियाँ —  
सुबह से, सुबह,  
काला करती जा रही है,

इक फूल जो छूट गया।  
मेरी हड्डियों में निस्तब्धता थमी है,  
दूर के खेत मेरा दिल पिघला रहे हैं,

धमकाते हैं  
मुझे इक ऐसे स्वर्ग की ओर,  
तारा—हीन, पिता—हीन, इक काला पानी....



# Translator's Note

*by* Smita Agarwal

---

The best poems of Sylvia Plath never fail to amaze me. They're like the ragas of the North Indian Hindustani Classical tradition of music; a sequence of notes used over and over again, letting us through to yet another nuance, a hidden texture, a fresh insight with each rendition.

"Sheep in Fog" is a short poem on evanescence. The first image itself depicts suicide: "The hills step off into whiteness." In the under seventy words of text, the word 'sheep,' as well as a description or reference to the animal are just not there. Sheep vanishing into fog – white on white – becomes a powerful metaphor for mortality.

The poem encapsulates losing one's sense of self; a slow and steady psychological disintegration like the rust colored slow horse with dolorous bells walking into the fog; like the wisp of smoke left behind by the disappearing train. And, the terror of the unknown – of being let into a darkness – starless, fatherless – beyond any natural or human support.

In English, the poem is un-gendered. However, when the poem is translated into Hindi, the rules of the language demand that the 'I' be assigned a gender. I preferred to make it female simply because the poet is a woman.

# Evaluator's Note

*by* Ashima Bhardvaj

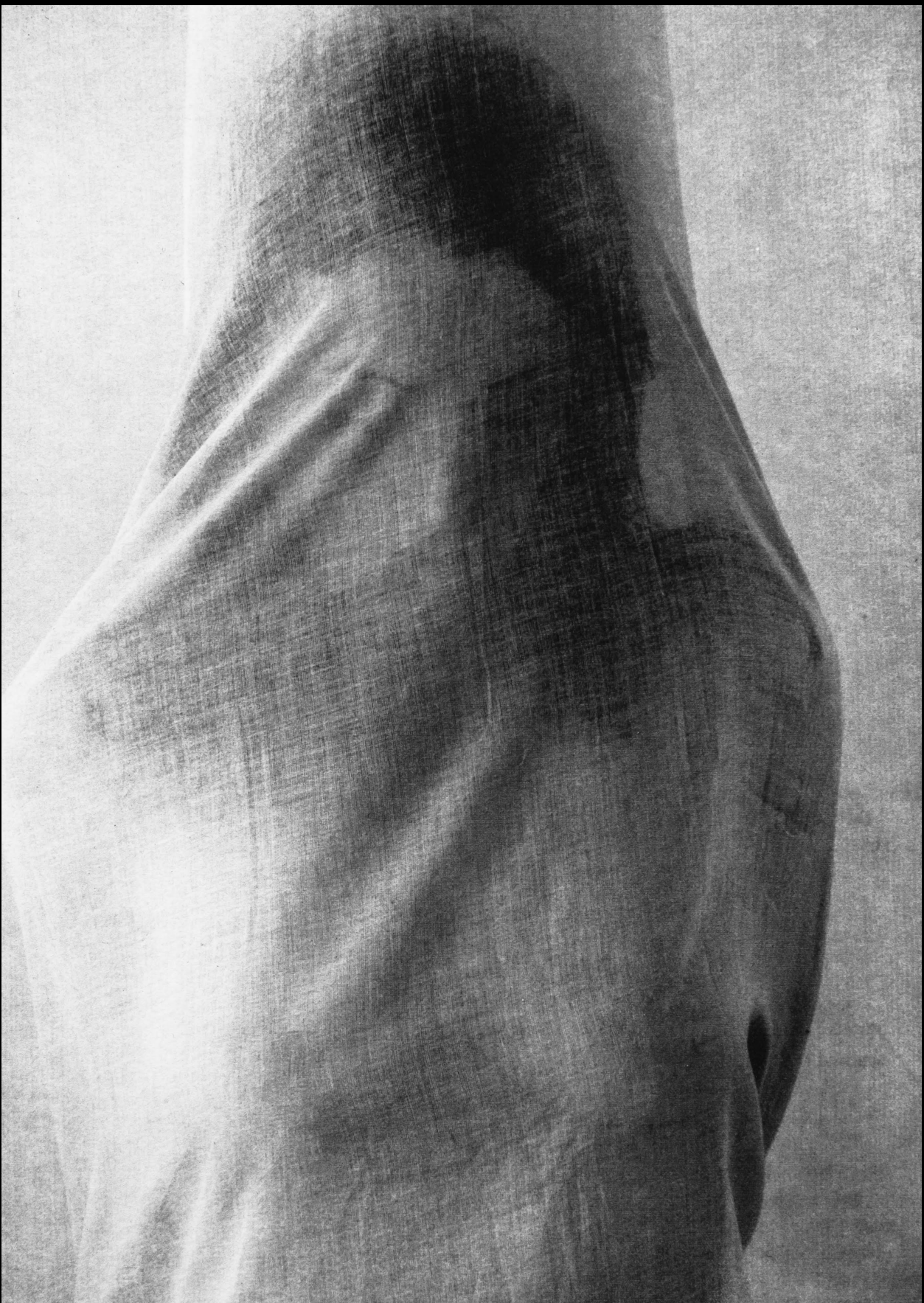
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The translation captures the essence of Plath's thought process in the Hindi language. As Hindi translation demands a gendered identification in case of the use of "I," the translator has selected the female gender. If the gender 'I' is referred to as a male identity in Hindi, the meaning of the text would change considerably. Rendering a female identity to the 'I' is a better way to grasp the essence of the given text.

The translator's note mentions a similarity between *ragas* of the North Indian Hindustani Classical tradition of music and the poetics of Sylvia Plath. This comparison can be appreciated if the reader has listened to a *raga* or is aware of the musical compositions.

The translator has taken care to be loyal to the form. The linguistic register uses vocabulary ranging from formal to colloquial words and expressions; this retains the stylistic simplicity of the primary text. The translator has made a successful effort to achieve the connotative parallels in the "target language."

*"Stillness"  
from The White Series by Linda Kosciewicz*



*Plath Profiles*

# Poetry



**"Stillness"** by Linda Kosciwicz- (previous page)

*Polymer photogravure, 2010, Edition – 50*

*See End Matter for Artist's Statement*

# LUNATIC THIRTEENS, MONUMENTAL SHAM

by Jacquelyn Shah

*The hour is crowed in lunatic thirteens.*

Sylvia Plath, "Doomsday"

*You never altered your amused belief*

*That life was a mere monumental sham.*

Sylvia Plath, "Dirge for a Joker"

I.

Hard, the pellets that have come to us  
like hail that pummels windshields, heads,  
reward for shaping all raw data from  
the vale of tears. Our hands, dry & cold,  
hold these primal rocks. They do not melt.  
Watch the heaping up of global angers,  
field of knots that burgeon into tangles.  
Watch, they're ready for a terrible harvest.  
The rain is steady on the glass between  
one country & the next, the sun exploded.  
A reign of bits, stars & night is all  
we see. The moon is gone. I have my own  
opinions, fist as tight as anyone's.

II.

. . . just keeps on going strong, tick-tock tick-tock  
tick-tock . . . I wait, taut within cocoon  
drawing dotted lines in yellow chalk,  
perforations sweet. Break out, break soon!  
This instar though . . . tick-tock tick-tock . . . seems endless . . .  
I watch the clock, its hands & thirteen numbers,  
its deadpan face: all proof to me it's heartless.  
I want, I long to shrink from the edges of sham  
called *living*, fold in my pupal form to implode.  
Me in this lunatic scheme? . . . tick-tock . . . what hokum!  
O, to be nothing, or at least, the hollow of geode.  
But butterfly's my fate—I'll break, fall up

to sky, & flap, sunup sunup sunup . . .

III.

They form the incorporeal: those odes  
& epics, myths, fables, sagas, sonnets—  
in the sea of human fabrication, they're droplets.  
Material assemblies known as roads,  
bridges; castles, cloisters, shrines, abodes;  
spires & steeples piercing clouds, all summits  
are honored more. And garb, like helmets,  
uniforms & badges used for preen & strut.  
But all erections peter out. And men  
are joyous when they do, for deconstruction  
is their true (especially explosion!) passion.  
Knock it down, blow it up! Again, again, again!  
Maul it, wreck it, trash it, kill it. Then film it all.

IV.

My own in this tight fist, opinion-grist  
I grind & grind, is this: the lunatic  
thirteen—slam jam ram wham  
cram bam flimflam sham & scam  
Sir Sam, Dam Miriam, even lamb & I-am—  
is cause for endless smiling, if not

outright laughter, (holding-sides kind).  
Otherwise all man-and-woman-kind  
would wallow endlessly in *cris de coeur*,  
tear out hair, destroy their decor  
(they often do).

While I make sure I find,  
grind & wind & bind—I'm mad!—a lot  
of words to build the frivolous . . . if not . . . ?

# Aria

*after Plath*

*by Jacquelyn Shah*

---

The dark thing will not sleep in me, I am a smile!

I gather bees and poppies, reassemble words for luck,  
sing of salt and iron, glitters masturbated to a spun-gold net  
that catches sky and waves and every odd-tongued night.  
Happy and enormous with my treasures and a Cerberus  
who guards them—moon and bone, yew and you,  
u's invading sulphur, fugue, untouchable, and mausoleum  
umbilicus, laburnum, eunuchs, tubular and surplus  
(U, the bucket letter sometimes holding plush and puke,  
but filaments and peppermints for me). Happy with my dog  
who dogs me, making sure that smiles are never irretrievable,  
wintering means eating sweet preserves. Eely tentacles  
of you caress despair until it rises up, declares itself  
a garment out of fashion, a poultice no more efficacious  
than a kindness or a madness.

Let me be an afterbirth  
wearing, in your memory, the poppy's bloody skirt.  
I'll buzz, sting, fly, dare to breathe, achoo at boot.  
Awe is mine, not for gods or stars, but stubbornness—  
a word that bears its born: defiance that makes me close  
like a sea anemone on life, and chase away the dark  
thing that would jinx me all the way to mud.

Let me breed  
this happiness, make it hulk and cornucopia, surge and sting,  
be a swivel-headed jeweler finding glints and facets,  
claim an ill-bred muse and feed her glowworms as I root  
among the skulls of incandescent songs. Let me sing  
of pistons all in motion, churning, churning  
in your distance blue and blood jet, all your multiplicities  
that carry me to wings and petals—hot bald wild!

# Sylvia's Dance

*by Sharon Portnoff*

---

She bit him hard on the cheek when they danced  
Blood ran down his face  
And she knew right then that she loved him

The salt she tasted had the heart of a rumba  
And the watery flow  
Of the soft summer kiss she had given her father

By the lake house they had rented that summer  
Never again  
Would she let flowers and perfume

Overwhelm the beat of her own life  
But the blood and  
The water and the smell overwhelmed her

And she knew she was alone without a face  
To meet her face  
Without a cheek tasting neither salty nor sweet



# The Cooking Calculus of Sylvia Plath

by Crystal Hurdle

---

money money money!  
food food fo--  
never enough  
an all-inclusive summer camp  
prescient greedy Sylvia drinks  
six glasses of milk at lunch time  
wants as many stomachs as a cow  
could store provender for hard times  
years down the road

again asks her mother to send  
her blessed cookbook again  
"Ted likes this" in her black hand  
beguiles the bidding collector  
dramatic irony  
the hopeful recollections of a happier home  
a groaning board  
the way to man's heart is through

while abroad, she and Ted can live  
on one pound a day  
cooking from scratch  
bargaining for potatoes and butter in Benidorm  
one stall a couple of pesetas cheaper  
maybe some fish but not meat

the cookbook's anticipated selling price higher than  
the cost of a brand new kitchen  
with all the mod cons she never had

Today's *The Really Garbage Cookbook*  
instead of her *The Joy of Cooking*  
how to scavenge-feed oneself

Sylvia too classy  
to resort to Dumpster diving  
for still viable edibles  
not yet compost or maggoty meat  
a better strata of poverty  
as she frantically turns the pages  
wanting cheap and filling to look and taste good

she forces herself to do up a budget  
to remember which brackets to start within  
is it the square or the round?  
square meals eye of round

next to the veal dish  
Ted savours  
too expensive for often!  
chuck and top rump tarted up with parsley  
made to melt in your mouth  
the cheaper cuts of meat tenderized  
what he doesn't know won't  
cover up anything with grated cheese  
and call it by a French name

the way to a man's heart  
is through his woman's bank balance

Irma von Starkloff Rombauer  
cookbook author/philosopher/prose poet/financial advisor  
"Assume the worst but serve it with parsley"  
credo of life for the impoverished  
dough                      biscuits  
          clams                bread  
                  cheese      cabbage  
                          bones  
                          bare bones  
eat it bank it  
want more and more of it  
too bad you can't eat paper

Sylvia licks her lips  
turns a page  
gains confidence  
starch fills you up  
bring home the bacon  
the way to a man's

calculus rictus plague  
ledger sheets  
red and black [ink] Sylvia's favourite colours  
debit and credit  
neither a borrower nor a lender be  
begging and borrowing  
promise you'll do anything

good to be in a stew  
earn and eat your greens  
take a mallet to the meat  
punishingly thin and tender  
bruised innocence  
fresh flesh  
toe to tail will get you more  
use all of the animal  
bake your cake and bank it too  
save money, good eco/nomy

clever housewives  
do the math =  
thrifty Sylvia boils spilt milk  
flays the carcass ) (  
knows shows  
the (spent) appetite saves all  
and (parsimonious) love costs dear

# As Is

*by* Daniel R. Martinez

---

Windows are dibbuk boxes designed  
to keep us confined in our reflections,  
no refractions of anything else.  
Inside the dark we turn in circles looking for  
something else only to be returned  
to a base self.

Every so often there may be a sliver  
to peer out at the world in its true form,  
though mostly we shuffle,  
lost with no direction  
in the manic maze of a mind  
that had no choice but to be born.

# Not The Ones You Wrote

*by Sarah Brown Weitzman*

The theory goes  
that the toll  
of experience you dipped into  
twice – first as it happened  
worse when you put it down  
on a page –  
made it a killing art.

Life was too hard  
a word for you to use  
in your poetry.  
Instead it was your wont  
to turn it over  
like a rock  
to have the other side exposed  
and what would crawl out.

But there were times  
when you found honey  
in your hive  
mind, like the kind  
you sucked through your teeth  
near the end  
on the BBC  
then dredged up again for the shock  
and sting  
and finally forced  
into the rhythms  
of your breathing  
last.

Yet I think  
not the ones you wrote  
but those you never dared  
to broach  
uncontrolled  
became a murder tome.

# American Engines

by W. K. Buckley

*Fierce-throated beauty!/....*

*Law of thyself complete...*

Walt Whitman

While I wrenched to replace  
a fuel pump  
on an F-150, straight-six,  
an engine easy for 300 thousand miles,

I thought of Plath's cast iron  
imagination,  
its vision in blue fuel,  
as if it could write for a thousand years.

And when I slammed down the hood,  
I thought of how she  
slammed down her life,

giving us a voice  
humming on asphalt,

a voice  
in its own mechanics,

this  
steel pump for American poetry.

*Plath Profiles*

# Reviews

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# Mary Ventura and the Rebirth Kingdom

by Gary Leising

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The reading public has now had some time with Sylvia Plath's "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" and reviewers have weighed in with a variety of interpretations. The story might be feminist, about "the aid women can provide each other" (Sehgal). A similar review suggests the same kind of empowerment; the reviewer asserts the protagonist does not need another's help: "[ "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" ] is a story about a young woman who recognizes her fate where all those who share it fail to do so, about a young woman who sees she has the power to change her own life" (Van Duyn). Others read it within the context of "the demons [Plath] struggled with from adolescence until her untimely suicide at age 31" (Clift). Karen V. Kukil situates the story in the context of Plath's reading; Kukil cites Dante in particular as she sees the ninth kingdom as "a place probably similar to Dante's frozen ninth circle hell, where Satan and the sinners suffer in eternal darkness and cold." She further connects the story's journey to Plath's own experience of train travel, particularly noting a journal entry comparing Grand Central station to Hell: "Hell was the Grand Central subway on Sunday morning. And I was doomed to burn in ice, numb, cold, revolving in crystal, neutral, passive vacuums, void of sensation." (Plath 153). Heather Clark also describes the hellish nature of the story: "Mary realizes that the passengers have all chosen to die. The train is suicide."

Clark recognizes that "the story's real subjects are depression, suicide, and rebirth." Along with this insight, I suggest that we might see all of Plath's work as ultimately leading to rebirth. Tragically, as Clark concludes, "[f]iction could not conjure fact," as this story was completed eight months before Plath's first suicide attempt; likewise, we know of her death in 1963, weeks after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, which fictionalizes the summer of her life after this story's composition. "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" ends with some obvious overtones of death and rebirth: having escaped the train at the seventh kingdom's dilapidated platform, evaded the icy snake coiling at her ankles, Mary finds herself in a beautiful city of light, "[l]ike one awakening from a sleep of death" (40). Perhaps that snake alludes to Satan in the



garden of Eden. If so, then rather than falling, we see Mary ascending, shaking off the temptation Eve and Adam succumbed to, and rising toward a paradisiacal garden. The young girl, who was deposited on the train by her parents at the story's opening, now meets the woman who sat with her on the train, advised her escape, and "lifted her head and met Mary's eyes with a blue gaze of triumphant love" (40). Speaking as if, perhaps, a replacement for the parents who sent Mary away on this allegorical journey toward death, the woman says, "I have been waiting for you, dear" (40).

On December 2, 1952, Plath wrote to her mother: "Just finished the Divine Comedy. Whew!" (*Letters* 1 528-529) As Kukil points out, Mary Ventura leaves the train before arriving at the final destination, perhaps refusing to visit hell as Plath writes "Unlike God, I can't be happy with souls suffering in hell!" (*Letters* 1 528-529). The date of the letter is significant, as Plath finished writing her story on December 12, 1952; her reading of Dante would be fresh in her mind (Steinberg). As Dante escaped his *Inferno*, Mary would leave the hell that awaited her. Her guide, the woman in the brown coat, tells her, "Go up the stairs, even if they look black" (35). In his ninth circle, Dante believes he is going into a black place—"I thought we were returning into Hell again"—and his Virgil tells him, "by such stairs... we must depart from so much ill" (183).<sup>1</sup>

If we look ahead to the conclusion of Dante's journey in the *Paradiso*, we discover more parallels to Mary's final destination. Mary sees a city park, bright with "natural sunlight... in full brilliance" (39). Plath writes, "Everywhere about the park the pinnacles of the city rose in tall white granite spires, their glass windows flashing in the sun" (40). Dante sees the final stages of paradise likewise bathed in light: "there shone around me a living light, leaving me swathed in such a web of its glow that naught appeared to me" (586). Plath's Mary emerges into "fertile gold webs of sunlight"; Plath, interestingly, uses a word from the translation of Dante as a metaphor for the light: web (39). Plath's park contains a springtime flower vendor with "full boxes of white roses and daffodils, looped with green leaves" (40). Dante's vision includes a river with flowers surrounding it, "banks painted with marvellous spring" (587); his heaven includes the "yellow of the eternal rose" (588), perhaps suggested in Plath by the yellow daffodils next to white roses. If echoing Dante, Plath would certainly include white, as Beatrice draws Dante's attention to "the white-robed concourse! / See how large our city sweepeth!" (588). Plath's pinnacled city with its flashing sunlit windows recalls Dante's vision of "A light up yonder which maketh the Creator visible unto the

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<sup>1</sup> This and other quotations from Dante are taken from the Carlyle-Wicksteed Translation published in Random House's Modern Library series; this was the translation Plath read, her copy of which is held in Indiana University's Lily Library.

creature" (588). Finally after seeing the city, Dante meets a saint, Bernard, who offers a prayer to Mary for Dante's salvation. With another's intercession, Dante continues on his journey toward paradise's redemptive state. After that prayer is offered, "[Mary's] eyes, of God beloved and venerated, fixed upon him who prayed, showed us how greatly devout prayers please her" (604). Likewise, the woman who helped Plath's Mary looks at her with "a blue gaze of triumphant love" (40). Both Dante and Mary Ventura—with the guidance and intercession of others—conclude their stories with love and triumph, with escape from hell or the seemingly inescapable train.

If we see these both of endings as redemptive, as moments of rebirth, it might be worth considering all of Plath's writing as gesturing toward such a theme, especially by looking at the endings of the two books published in her lifetime. "The Stones," which concludes *The Colossus and Other Poems*, begins "This is the city where men are mended," and it ends, "I shall be good as new" (1, 45). At *The Bell Jar's* conclusion, when Esther Greenwood enters the boardroom for her interview before being released from the hospital, she muses, "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice" (244). Though not published in the order of her manuscript until 2004, "Wintering" concludes *Ariel* hopefully: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (50). In terms of a Dantean connection, we might note the poem's penultimate line referring to "Christmas roses," and the birth of Christ as promise of redemption (49). With "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" published on its own, we now have a fourth book by Sylvia Plath concluding with rebirth.<sup>2</sup>

As long as missing or destroyed manuscripts of *Falcon Yard* or *Interminable Loaf/Doubletake* remain missing or burned, we cannot know if this theme remained constant in all Plath's work. However, as we consider her life—for as Plath scholars, we do turn to biography—we might look at her letters. In what may have seemed like one of the darker moments in her life, she did write to others about her own rebirth. As her marriage appeared to be ending and Hughes was finally moving out of Court Green in Autumn 1962, we do see some hope amid her depression:

I think when I am free of him my own sweet life will come back to me,  
bare and sad in a lot of places, but my own, and sweet enough. (*Letters* 2  
832)

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<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to consider how Plath's other short fiction might fit into this scheme, as Ted Hughes's chronological arrangement of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* provides no insight into how Plath might have ordered such a collection or what stories she might have selected for inclusion.

Luckily Dr. Beuscher & my stay at McLean's gave me the strength to face pain & difficulty. It will take time to mend, & more time to begin to feel there is any other life possible for me, but I am resolute and shall work hard. (843)

I want to shirk nothing. To flee nothing. I have bad times, of course, when I feel grim, but have all sorts of ways to cheer myself. (896)

She corresponds to everyone at length about renting a flat in London, renting out Court Green, putting her children in good schools, organizing her finances, and, of course, writing. In particular, she mentions her second novel, "semi-autobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer although she thought he was wonderful & perfect" (913). Would that have ended with the wife finding a post-marriage rebirth that Sylvia Plath did not, despite the letters' indication that she sought it? "Fiction," Heather Clark writes, "could not conjure fact." The final printed letter in volume two of Plath's letters lets us know of her despair and that she is not able to see rebirth ahead. Hope at her marriage's ending is now in past tense: "now I shall grow out of his shadow, I *thought*, I shall be me" (967, italics added for emphasis). This letter suggests no optimism: "I am aware of a cowardice in myself, a wanting to give up," or "How can I get out of this ghastly defeatist cycle" (968).

Of course we cannot change the facts of Plath's life. But as a story such as "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" is discovered, we can hope that more of Plath's writing is discovered (or rediscovered: this story wasn't "lost" or newly "discovered" for publication. When the *New Yorker* described it as such, they were "fact-check[ed]" (Bahr) by Indiana University's library on twitter). Archives hold more of Plath's writing that hasn't been published. Since the publication of *The Collected Poems* we have known there were more poems written by a young Plath not yet published. This story's publication—especially on the heels of the two volumes of letters—hopefully will lead to a kind of rebirth for other uncollected Plath writing—poems, letters, and prose. A continued critical reassessment of her writing and themes can keep Plath's literary legacy alive. We can hope this will include a rebirth of novels, journals, and poems previously considered lost. At the very least seeing *complete* (rather than collected) volumes of poems and short fiction seems realistic, and a way to keep Plath alive as she hoped poems would live and travel—"if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime" (*Johnny Panic* 66)

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## **Artist Statement**

### **“Lady Lazarus” and “Stillness”**

*Linda Kosciwicz*

Throughout my life, Plath’s poetry has been featured at times of change and emotional intensity. It has been an inspiration for my creativity—both as an artist, and as a musician. Sitting down on my own and absorbing the poetry of Sylvia Plath was a special place to go. It was a refuge from the world; a place to discover new ideas—particularly about womanhood—and a place of emotions. I was particularly drawn to performative aspects of the poetry.

At the age of 17, I was hooked by “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus”. At art college and newly independent from my family, the rebelliousness, emotion, and sheer drama of the poetry struck me immediately. “Daddy” encompassed conflicted emotions about my family and sadness about my Dad’s early life. He was a refugee from a German concentration camp and held his displaced person status until the day he died. The emphatic “You do not do, you do not do, Any more” and “In the German tongue, in the Polish town Scraped flat by the roller, Of wars, wars, wars” spoke to me of my family history and male authority in general.

“Lady Lazarus”, with its macabre cabaret - “Them unwrap me hand and foot - The big strip tease” - showed me a subversive woman. Around the same time, I read *Spare Rib*, a magazine that championed women’s equality. At Dundee Art College in 1977, with its all-male painting school, the male gaze was alive and well. Female models were nude; males wore underpants. Against this background, the sedition and self-determination of Lady Lazarus was a breath of fresh air! And I poured this into my performances as a punk singer.

In 2010, Lady Lazarus was the impetus for a group of images I called The White Series. I had returned to thinking about performance as a way of communicating my visual ideas. It felt natural as I was a musician and had received dance training as a child. I had already started to experiment with movement sequences and timed photography for a project that I had carried out for the University of Edinburgh in 2009. This culminated in a virtual dance sequence performed by 4 older people who were part of the University’s ageing research.

As well as the male gaze, I started to think about “Lady Lazarus” as a poem that depicted the fragility and transience of life. At that time, I was looking for a visual way to represent these ideas. Plath’s use of personae in general and the first person was something that I wanted to emulate. I began to perform movement sequences myself and photograph them. I took “Lady Lazarus’s” white cloth and used it for The White Series. It seemed to me a very simple and direct way of referring to familiar birth and death rituals as well as femininity, innocence, and purity.

Creating images that were personal and female was important to me. I chose poses for their emotional intensity and their universal meaning - a fetal pose, a madonna pose, a corpse-like

pose, a twisting pose suggestive of struggle. Some poses suggested classical paintings and sculpture; I was particularly inspired by Bernini's ability to sculpt cloth in marble. Timed photography allowed me to break down the movements into single poses and to photograph myself. Since I was photographing myself, I did not see what was being photographed until the sequence was complete. I relied upon the spatial awareness that I had developed over years of childhood dance training. The result was hundreds of images from which a much smaller number was chosen.

The image "Stillness" was featured in my first sequence of The White Series. On reflection, it was partly an exploration of my emotions following a death in my family some years before. I was attempting to uncover some aspect of the inexplicable mystery of life and death. I repeated very similar poses with subtle differences. I was intensely interested in the subtleties of light on a white cloth, under which I moved slightly. The filmy, transparent cloth blurred these slight movements. In this image I wanted to indicate an ethereal woman and suggest modesty, shame and desire. I arranged my head and body like a renaissance madonna and pulled my arms and the cloth with it behind my back.

"Stillness" was followed by the Breath of Life sequence which includes the "Lady Lazarus" image. Once again, I wore the fine white cloth and explored my feelings about transience. I performed on a bed placed beside a window with strong sunshine beaming in. Placing the camera parallel to the bed and in line with my eyes, the bed was intended to heighten the stagey, voyeuristic, and claustrophobic effect. The bed takes up virtually all the picture space and I "exhibited" myself on it.

To suggest the journey from life to death to rebirth, I began and ended the sequence with recumbent poses. The sequence begins with a lifting and upward movement towards the sunshine. This is followed by the pivotal point of the sequence where my body is dissolved by the same light. This dissolution and the subsequent struggling downward movements were intended to portray decline after the hopefulness of the first part of the sequence.

Since that time, Plath's poetry continues to be an inspiration. I would be keen to explore new themes and work collaboratively with Plath scholars, researchers, poets and writers. I'm particularly interested in the use of female personae.

Please contact me at [mywhiteroom@icloud.com](mailto:mywhiteroom@icloud.com) if you'd like to discuss this. My work has been exhibited throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, and Malaysia and can be seen on my website: <https://mywhiteroom.myportfolio.com/> and on Facebook @Linda Kosciwicz. I'd be delighted to hear from you.

*Plath Profiles*

# Biographies



## Poetry and Creative Writing

### William K. Buckley

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W.K. Buckley received an MA in English and Education from San Diego State University and a PhD from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He has published books on L.F. Celine, D. H.. Lawrence, Sylvia Plath and other topics and he is an internationally published poet. He founded Plath Profiles at Oxford University in the U.K in 2008. He currently lives 35 miles south of Chicago and travels to his home state of California, after teaching at Indiana University.

### Crystal Hope Hurdle

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Crystal Hurdle teaches English and Creative Writing at Capilano University in North Vancouver, BC. In October 2007, she was Guest Poet at the International Sylvia Plath Symposium at the University of Oxford, reading from *After Ted & Sylvia: Poems*. Her work, poetry and prose, has been published in many journals, including *Canadian Literature*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, *Event*, *Bogg*, *Vallum*, *Ars Medica*, and *The Dalhousie Review*. *Teacher's Pets*, a teen novel in verse, was published in 2014. *Sick Witch* (poems) is forthcoming from Ronsdale Press.

### Daniel R. Martinez

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Daniel is a former Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Ethnic Literature at his alma mater. Now residing with his spouse in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he is published in numerous magazines, journals, reviews, and has presented at several national and international conferences. He is currently working on a semi-fictional trilogy of his family's immigration to the New Mexico Territory from Durango, Mexico.

### Sharon Portnoff

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Sharon Portnoff holds the Elie Wiesel Chair in Judaic Studies and is Associate Professor of Classics at Connecticut College. She is the author of *Reason and Revelation Before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim* (U.



Toronto, 2011) and co-editor of *The Companionship of Books: Essays in Honor of Laurence Berns* (Lexington, 2012) and *Emil L. Fackenheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew* (Brill, 2007). Among the places her poems have appeared are *Midstream*, the *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, the *Journal of the Pirandello Society of America*, and *Free Inquiry*, and on *The Poetry Porch*(<http://poetryporch.com/>).

## Jacquelyn Shah

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Jacquelyn “Jacsun” Shah, M.A., M.F.A., Ph.D., English literature and creative writing, has received grants from the University of Houston and the Houston Arts Alliance. Poetry has appeared in journals/anthologies, such as *Panoply*, *Gyroscope Review*, *The Woven Tale Press*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Texas Review*, *Anon* (Britain), *Rhino*, and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal* (Australia). A poetry chapbook, *small fry* was published in 2017, a full-length poetry book, *What to Do with Red* in 2018, and she’s a recent winner of Literal Latté’s Food Verse contest.

## Sarah Brown Weitzman

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Sarah Brown Weitzman, a past National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Poetry and Pushcart Prize nominee, is widely published in hundreds of journals and anthologies including *New Ohio Review*, *North American Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Rattle*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Miramar*, *Spillway* and elsewhere. Her books are available from Amazon and Main Street Rag Publishing Co.

## Essay

## Ikram Hili

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Ikram Hili is a teaching assistant at the Higher Institute of Applied Languages of Moknine (University of Monastir) and a member of the Laboratory on Approaches to Discourse at the Faculty of Letters and

Human Sciences of Sfax. In 2017, Hili earned a Ph.D. Degree from the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Humanities of Manouba; her work is centered on the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Hili's main fields of interest are 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry, Modern Manuscript Studies, Archival Works and Culture Studies. She is a former Fulbright Visiting Scholar to Indiana University Bloomington and Smith College Massachusetts, where she worked closely with Sylvia Plath's Collections. She was awarded a fellowship at IU, being named a 2018 Summer Repository Research Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study.

### Bethany Layne

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Dr. Bethany Layne is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at De Montfort University, Leicester. She has published widely on biographical fiction, in journals including *The Henry James Review*, *Woolf Studies Annual*, and *Adaptation*, and her interviews with David Lodge, Colm Tóibín and Susan Sellers appear in *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions Across the Globe* (Bloomsbury, 2019). Her monograph, *Henry James in Contemporary Fiction: The Real Thing* is under contract with Palgrave, while her edited collection, *Biofiction in Context*, is under contract with Cambridge Scholars. She pioneered the first specialist biofiction module in the UK, and, in 2017, co-organised the Postmodernist Biofictions conference at the University of Reading.

### Gary Leising

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Gary Leising is professor and chair of English at Utica College in New York. He has published and presented on Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, James Dickey, and other contemporary poets. He is also the author of one book and three chapbooks of poetry.

### Mariana Chaves Petersen

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Mariana Chaves Petersen is a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant in

the Department of English at University of Miami and an instructor of English and Portuguese at Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul. She was awarded her M.A. from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in 2017 for her thesis "The Loss of Language in Sylvia Plath's Narrative: Woman's Experience and Trauma in *The Bell Jar*, 'Tongues of Stone,' and 'Mothers.'" She has also written on Plath's *Three Women* and Christine Jeff's *Sylvia*. Her work on the latter, entitled "Sylvia and the Absence of Life before Ted," was presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Association of Adaptation Studies and published in the journal *Anuário de Literatura*. Her research interests include gender and sexuality studies, queer studies, and contemporary literature and film.

### Jessica Phillips

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Jess Phillips is an PhD candidate in Literary Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

### Catherine Rankovic

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Catherine Rankovic has a B.A. from Marquette University, an M.A. from Syracuse University, and an M.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis, where she taught for 21 years. In 2018 Rankovic finished cataloging and transcribing Aurelia Plath's Gregg shorthand annotations on archived Sylvia Plath material at the Lilly Library at Indiana University and in Smith College's Mortimer Rare Book Collection. At Ulster University in 2017 she presented her preliminary findings in a paper titled "Medusa in the Margins" at the "Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments" conference. The Aurelia Plath shorthand data sets for the Lilly Library materials are posted online at <https://epublications.marquette.edu/aureliaplath>. Rankovic posts Aurelia Plath research at [AureliaPlath.blogspot.com](http://AureliaPlath.blogspot.com).

### Misa Stekl

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Míša Stekl is a graduate student in the Program of Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University. His research follows questions of sexuality through 20<sup>th</sup>-century continental philosophy; feminist, queer,

and critical race studies; as well as Anglophone, Francophone, and Czech literature.

## Candice Wuehle

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Candice Wuehle lives in Gunnison, Colorado where she is a lecturer of English at Western Colorado University. She is the author of *Death Industrial Complex* (Action Books, forthcoming) and *BOUND* (Inside the Castle Press, 2018) as well as several chapbooks. Her writing has appeared in *Best American Experimental Writing 2020*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *The Volta*, *The Bennington Review*, and *The New Delta Review*. She holds an MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Kansas.

## Special Feature: Play Excerpt

### Eric Robert Shoemaker

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Robert Eric Shoemaker is a poet-playwright, translator, and theatre artist. Eric holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Poetics from Naropa University and is currently a Comparative Humanities PhD student at the University of Louisville. Eric has released two books, *We Knew No Mortality* (2018) and *30 Days Dry* (2015), has one on the way, *Ca'Venezia* (2019). Eric's writing has been or will be featured in *Signs and Society*; *Bombay Gin*; *Asymptote*; *Exchanges*; *The Gordian Review*; and others. Follow Eric's work at [www.reshoemaker.com](http://www.reshoemaker.com).

## Poetry Translation "Sheep In Fog" by Sylvia Plath; *trans.* in Hindi

### Smita Agarwal

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Smita Agarwal is a well-known cultural person and Indian poet writing in English. She hails from Mussoorie, Uttarakhand. Her poems have received awards and residencies from the British Council (1994), the Arvon Foundation (1997) and the Charles Wallace Trust (1999). She is the

author of *Wish-granting Words, Poems*, (New Delhi, Ravi Dayal, 2002) and *Mofussil Notebook* (Calcutta, Sampark, 2016). She is also the editor of *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2014). Her poems have been curated in magazines, journals and anthologies published from India and abroad. Her critical articles have appeared in *Poetry Review*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and her translations in *Plath Profiles*. She is a professor of English, University of Allahabad, India and Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at the same university. She is also a professional singer with samples of her songs available at: <http://www.beatofindia.com>, as well as in YouTube and Sound Cloud.

## Artwork

### Linda Kosciwicz

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Linda Kosciwicz was born in Scotland and lives near Edinburgh. Her art practice includes photography, video, music (she is a musician), print making and painting. For much of her career she has focussed on people, society and the human condition and has returned again and again to the human body and face as her creative inspiration. She has exhibited throughout the UK, France, Spain, Poland and Malaysia. In 2011 she was a finalist in the International Photography Open Salon, Arles, France and in 2012 she was awarded the Pauline Fay Lazarus prize for work based on the human body. In 2010 and 2012 respectively, she received Visual Arts Awards from Fife Council, Scotland for photography and multi-media projects.

She is best known for her White Series where she photographed herself performing a series of gestures and movements inspired by women's relationship to the colour white and the poetry of Sylvia Plath. She has worked in projects involving the University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh Printmakers and the Scottish Arts Club. Current work in progress includes Beltane Stories, which explores the personal transformation experienced by members of the Beltane Fire Society and Dream Visions an installation for the 2020 Womenbeing conference which will use as its inspiration the themes in *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan.

Email and web: [mywhiteroom@icloud.com](mailto:mywhiteroom@icloud.com)

[www.mywhiteroom.myportfolio.com](http://www.mywhiteroom.myportfolio.com)

Video: Breath of Life <https://vimeo.com/lindakosciwicz/breath-of-life>

Transformations: Life Portraits <https://youtu.be/KfS-WmGwp9Q>

## Shawn Gillick

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Shawn Gillick is a former U.S. Marine who has served four honorable years in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1998 – 2002. Upon return from duty, Shawn completed two years of course work studying Psychology and Philosophy at San Diego City College. He continues to research both independently and plans to go back to school to continue his studies in the near future.

As an innovator, Shawn has also been employed as both a Web Designer and Graphic Artist since 2002. As an entrepreneur, he also ran his own online business selling airline seat belt extenders for overweight and obese passengers (2010 –2012). His web & graphic design skills are completely self-taught.

Shawn's current work is focused on graphic art and design. He is always looking for projects to extend his portfolio. Shawn's ultimate goal in life is to become either a psychology or philosophy professor.

## Staff

### William Buckley, PhD, Founding Editor

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Dr. William Buckley is a retired Indiana University Northwest professor and a poet whose work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the most honored literary project in America. He also is the founding editor of *Plath Profiles*, an online journal of interdisciplinary studies on Sylvia Plath, originally founded during his time at Oxford University in the UK.

### Robert Eric Shoemaker, Poetry Editor

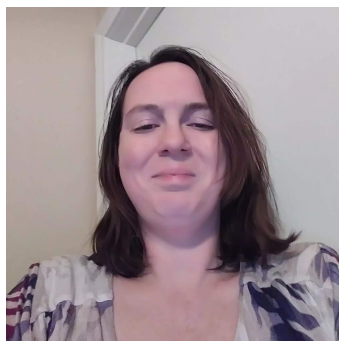
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Robert Eric Shoemaker is a poet-playwright, translator, and theatre artist. Eric holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Poetics from Naropa University and is currently a Comparative Humanities PhD student at the University of Louisville. Eric has released two books, *We Knew No Mortality* (2018) and *30 Days Dry* (2015), and has one on the way, *Ca'Venezia* (2019). Follow Eric's work at [reshoemaker.com](http://reshoemaker.com).

## Dolores Batten, Essay Editor

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Dolores Batten is an English Lecturer at Eastern Florida State College. She holds an M.A. in Literature and Language from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, TX, and is an active member in both the Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society as well as the National Society for Leadership and Success. With over 9 years of experience in the teaching profession, her current plans now include pursuing a PhD in Texts and Technology through the University of Central Florida.

## Kathleen Qiu, Layout Editor

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Kathleen Qiu is a San Francisco based costume and graphic designer. She is currently working on her MFA in Costume Design from the Academy of Art University as well as costume designing for various theaters around the San Francisco Bay Area. Follow her work at [www.kathleenq.com](http://www.kathleenq.com) and Instagram [@kat.jlq](https://www.instagram.com/kat.jlq).

## Peer Review and Contributors

### Gary Leising, Copyeditor

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Gary Leising is Professor and Chair of English at Utica College in



upstate NY. He is the author of a book of poems, *The Alp at the End of My Street* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2014), as well as three chapbooks of poems. His poetry has appeared in many literary journals, and he has published prose on poets including James Dickey, Aime Cesaire, David Kirby, and Carl Phillips.

### Sarah Alcaide-Escue, Copyeditor

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Sarah Alcaide-Escue is a poet, multi-disciplinary artist, editor, and copywriter. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics from Naropa University and her BA in Creative Writing from the University of South Florida. In addition to serving as a reader for *Plath Profiles*, Sarah is a poetry editor at *The Adirondack Review*. She is the author of *Bruised Gospel* (The Lune, 2019), and her work has been published widely in national and international publications. You can visit her website at [www.sarahescue.com](http://www.sarahescue.com).

### Alexandra Merritt Matthews, Contributor

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Alexandra Merritt Matthews is a New York-based actor, singer, and writer originally from Buffalo, NY. Alexandra received her MFA in Acting from The New School for Drama and her BA in Comparative Literature from The University of Chicago. For four years on and off, Alexandra played Sylvia Plath in *PLATH/HUGHES*, an intimate duet musical about the life and work of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Alexandra is also a published poet, with work most recently appearing in *Earl of Plaid*. For more information and current projects, visit [www.AlexandraMerrittMathews.com](http://www.AlexandraMerrittMathews.com). Follow her work on Twitter [@AMMAlexandra](https://twitter.com/AMMAlexandra) and Instagram [@alexandramerrittmathews](https://www.instagram.com/alexandramerrittmathews).

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# Submissions

Plath Profiles is an interdisciplinary journal that welcomes and encourages the submission of scholarly articles on the subject of Plath's writings as well as art, poetry, book reviews, memoir, pedagogy, and student research.

Articles are peer reviewed.

The Editors request the following stipulations:

- Articles should have a maximum of 5000 words.
- Creative work has a maximum of 5 pages for prose and 7 pages for poetry. No exceptions.
- All articles must be submitted electronically via Scholarworks in Microsoft Word, single-spaced 12 point type, indents .25, no tabs, no unnecessary hard returns, name and title on every page.
- Images and diagrams must be submitted separately, be fully credited and have rights obtained in advance.
- Also include a short biography of no more than 50 words, included in the body of the file after the works cited list. Poor formatting may result in the rejection of your submission.
- Articles must be fully referenced using MLA and cited with full and accurate footnotes. The responsibility for supplying and accurately presenting such information is the author's alone. References must be from verifiable academic sources.
- If an article is approved, it is the duty of the author to submit their work by the agreed deadline, which is final.
- The Editor and the Editorial Board reserve the right to withdraw articles and their approval for articles at any time and without prior notification. Their decision is final.
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