CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONFLICT:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

by

Rathi Raman.

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Literature

University of Glasgow.

AUGUST: 1993.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my deepest thanks to my husband, Jaffer Ali, whose love, support and constant encouragement helped me to successfully complete this thesis. His unwavering faith in me helped me combat the writing blocks and moments of self-doubt that so often plague students of research. This thesis is dedicated to Jaffer for simply being there when I needed him most.

Many thanks to my parents, Raman and Rema Raman, for supporting my decision to pursue this research degree in the United Kingdom.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to my supervisor, Professor P.D. Hobsbaum of the Department of English Literature, Glasgow University, for his excellent guidance, constructive criticism and invaluable advice. It has certainly been a pleasure to be associated with a gentleman of such high professional integrity and calibre.

Thanks also to my co-supervisor, Dr.S.D. Kemp of the Department of English Literature, Glasgow University, for the many instructive sessions, especially in the context of Feminist Literary Theory.

My support system in Glasgow has largely been my close friends - people who I was fortunate to meet and get acquainted with during my stay in the U.K. A special word of appreciation for Christine Kelaidis, Costantinos Taliotis, and Kaliroy Halamandaris. When spirits sagged, it was this loyal bunch that rallied around, reminding me that there was indeed a light at the end of the tunnel! Many thanks to Elizabeth Mahoney and Leslie McDowell, my colleagues in the English Department, for their support and encouragement.

SUMMARY

CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONFLICT:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH

My analysis of the poetry of Sylvia Plath concentrates on the attempts to define the female self within the parameters of discourse through a search for a non-phallic articulable sexuality. Through separate analyses of Plath's four volumes of poetry, The Colossus, Crossing the Water, Winter Trees, and Ariel, I trace the manner in which the female self redeploys the concept of power through various linguistic reversals and textual travesties. While analyzing the four volumes, I notice a progression from the subservience to the Law of the Father[s] in The Colossus, [Chapter-1, "Becoming Another", Writing and Identity], to a newly formulated, powerful female self in Ariel. This progression is achieved through a steady infiltration of the text by elements of black humour, parody, masquerade and through supple variations of tone. [Chapter-2, Crossing the Rubicon]. All of these textual transgressions challenge the power of the manifest letters of the text and bring to the fore certain subversive elements that can potentially transform the meaning of the text. Plath's poetry projects the female self as capable of occupying an individuated space of power through linguistic dislocations and through an unabashed foregrounding of the female body as generative of an ambiguous sense of

potency. [Chapter-3, And then the Body Told Her Story]. In the search for identity, rivals are identified and dismissed through the introduction of the technique of bi-polarity, whereby the Self attains a certain dignity in proportion to the degree to which the rival "Other" stands disgraced. [Chapter-4, The "Other" Side of Writing]. The emergence of the powerful, articulate self in Ariel is counterpointed by the effect of the editor's hand on the body of the text. [Chapter-5, Quenching the Phoenix Fires]. The re-arrangement of Ariel and the disregard for authorial preference diminishes the inherent performance and spectacle of Plath's last poems. It restrains the message of recovery and triumphant release of a distinct female identity that would have surfaced, had Plath's original selection been adhered to. [Chapter-6, Re-covery and Release in Sylvia Plath's "Bee-Poems" or Ariel as it should be.].

In order to validate these claims, I maintain a fairly consistent working relationship with the psychological theories of Jacques Lacan on the nature of language and its relationship with the formation of the self; Julia Kristeva's re-reading of Lacan, with special emphasis on her theory of the semiotic and the abject in connection with "female" selfdom; and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival and its relevance in the realm of linguistic reversal and reclamation.

I do not attempt any chronologic ordering of texts in my analysis. Instead I have sought to follow the perversities and irregularities of Plath's poetic curve.

My method of arranging chapters seeks to roughly correspond to the sense of dialogic tension that I have witnessed repeatedly in Plath's poetry - between the self and the Other, language and instinctual drive, the body and the word. Central to the dyadic structure of my project is the chapter on motherhood recapturing the ambivalent relationship that Plath shared with her own Mother and with her children. It is my contention that Plath's poems on pregnancy and childbirth concentrate, more than anything else that she had ever written, on the deliberate foregrounding of the physical body as an articulable medium. By placing this chapter at the centre of my analysis, I trace the emergence of a decisive female self from under the colossal shadow of the patriarch, the Colossus, to the freewheeling flight & fluidity of "the red comet", "God's lioness", Ariel. Editorial interference leaves the Plathian reader with a finale bereft of the intended power of Plath's original version. Unless the reader retrieves the "real" body of the text from beneath the shadow of masculine Law, the text of the body, the narratology of female identity will remain a repressed undertone, consciousness that is in perpetual conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of the poetry of Sylvia Plath involves a process of resistance. Resistance to extrapolation of details from true life to manifest text; resistance to glamourize the text into a suicide note trimmed into form. That Sylvia Plath was seared by her father's death at the tender age of eight, and that this event largely shaped a vulnerable child into a hypersensitive adult, is an undeniable life story. It would not be an unjust claim that for Plath, the writing of poetry was often a means to exorcise family ghosts. Yet total reliance on biographical details to unlock the meaning of the text is to unfairly limit the intrinsic merit of many of the poems themselves. Such an approach would entail the inclusion or exclusion of poems purely on the basis of events that engendered them. Hence there are bound to be a number of "floating" poems whose subject matter does not fit this "event-equals-poem" mould. For instance, such an approach would impair the technical brilliance of Plath's more famous poems like "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", viewing them as mere appendages of psychic guilt and retribution. The insistence on analysing Plath as a pathological case has had the unfortunate effect of pulling the cover over the less frequently mentioned poems of Crossing the Water and Winter Trees. Poems like "Mirror" and "Candles" with their acute sense of a life passing by, or "Mary's Song"

and "Nick and the Candlestick" with their focus on the fragility of relationships in an increasingly chaotic world, have more often than not been side tracked in critical analysis in favour of the more acclaimed Ariel poems.

The earliest Plathian criticism concentrates on the link between poetry and neurosis. The awesome powers of poetry over the issues of life and death is the main thrust of A. Alvarez's critical evaluation of Plath's poetry. Alvarez was, quite literally, the Father of Plathian criticism, laying down the rules and measures by which Plath's poetry was to be henceforth analysed. Thus The Colossus was classified as Plath's "apprenticeship" work, preparing her for the grand sweep of the Ariel poems. The movement from The Colossus to Ariel was seen as a transition from the constraint of form to the freedom to "assault" through the colloquial idiom. He perceptively notes that the "finger count" of the early poems are replaced by the "ear count" of the later ones; that the brilliant scene setting of The Colossus became the description of states of mind by the time Plath wrote Ariel.1. Unwittingly however, Alvarez had initiated a trend that was to become common practice in Plathian criticism. This trend insists on a linear progression in Plath's art, from The Colossus to Ariel, skirting the technical variations and remarkable suppleness of tone in the poems of Crossing the Water and Winter Trees. The

---

1. A.Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", The Review, no:9, [Oct.9, 1963.].

two latter volumes have been carelessly grouped as "transitional" poems and have therefore hardly merited attention. Alvarez's reviews, published shortly after the news of Plath's sensational suicide2, inevitably make the all too simplistic equation between Plath's writing and her decision to take her own life.

> ---when her death finally came it was prepared for and in some degree, understood. However wanton it seemed, it was also in a way inevitable, even justified like some final unwritten poem.3.

The first seeds of the now famous Plath legend are clearly sown- the artist under duress, "pushed to the edge of breakdown"4, enacting a neurotic's desire for death, first literarily and then literally.

In his reviews in The Observer in 1965, and more explicitly in his book The Savage God [1971.], Alvarez propounded the concept of "extremist poetry". Poetry is seen as "art in extremis"; the artist as the persona extraordinaire and suicide as the natural, even logical correlative to the act of writing. In an article entitled "Beyond all this Fiddle", [March,1967], Alvarez defined "extremist" art as an example of avant garde writing, curiously urgent and intense. It was seen as a natural process of implosion wherein the artist losing the traditional comforts of cultural, religious or political ideologies, turns his or her gaze increasingly inward.

---

2. See A.Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", The Review, no:9, [Oct.9, 1963.]; and "Poetry in Extremis", The Observer- [Mar.12, 1965.].
3. "Poetry in Extremis", op.cit., p.26.
4. ibid.

> The artist--- pursues his insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it until mania, depression, paranoia and hallucinations that come in psychosis or are induced by drug, become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and soul were to the Romantics.5.

Lowell, Berryman, Hughes and Plath are, according to Alvarez, the pioneers of poetry "in extremis". Alvarez sees in these poets a certain similarity in expression, "a certain inner urgency which makes them push continuously at the limits of what poetry can be made to bear. Inevitably so, since each of them is salvaging his verse from the edge of some kind of personal abyss."6. Plath is seen as the most fearless explorer into "the hinterland of nihilism".

> She took Lowell's example to its logical conclusion, systematically exploring the nexus of anger, guilt, rejection, love and destructiveness which made her finally take her own life.7.

Yet Lowell and Hughes survived this nihilistic whirlpool where Plath did not. Are we to assume then that Lowell and Hughes stopped short of insights that made death an inevitability for Plath? Or that Plath had, what Alvarez calls, "the courage" that it takes to "gamble" and a curious "creative optimism that the other two poets lacked? Notice how intentionalistic critical judgement becomes with arguments such as these. Alvarez is however quick to state that "extremist" art can be extremely judged by viewing "the artist's experience on the outer

---

5. A.Alvarez, "Beyond all this Fiddle", The Times Literary Supplement, [Thurs.,Mar.23, 1967.], pp.229-232.
6. A.Alvarez, The Savage God, [Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971.], p.214.
7. ibid. p.216.

edge of whatever is tolerable" as a "substitute for creativity"8. Indeed a number of Plath's later poems, like "Cut", "Lesbos", "The Rival", have been wholly equated to particular domestic incidents with varying degrees of violence- from a physical laceration to the emotional trauma of adultery and abandonment. Alvarez's defence of extremist poetry is here pertinent-

> However rigidly his experience is internalised, the genuine artist does not just simply project his own system as a pattern for reality. He is what he is because his inner world is more substantial, variable and self renewing than that of ordinary people, so that even in his deepest isolation, he is left with something more sustaining than mere narcissism---9.

This does tie in with Plath's contention that poetry must be a controlled, inclusive experience.

> ---I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife---- I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying like madness,--- and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind."10.

Two other critics who reviewed Plath's poetry and its link with neurosis are David Holbrook and Edward Butscher. While Holbrook deals with Plath's poetry as the private topography of a schizoid, Butscher, in a much more personal and heavily biographical manner, propagates the myth of the suicidal woman. Like Alvarez, Holbrook accepts the obsessions of the self to be the hallmark of Plath's poetry. Butscher introduces a new strand in that he views Plath's poetry as a peculiar kind of defense

---

8. "Beyond all this Fiddle", see op.cit.
9. ibid.
10. The Poet Speaks, edited by Peter Orr, [Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966.], p.169.

mechanism. In other words, the written word seeking public approval becomes "a substitute for lost parental love".11. Butscher extrapolates a great deal while using Freudian tracts on the Oedipal tussle to analyse every Plathian poem. Holbrook is guilty of the same fault as he attempts to label Plath a schizophrenic through extensive use of passages from the works of psychoanalysts like R.D.Laing, Guntrip and Winnicott. At the end of his book entitled Sylvia Plath- Poetry and Existence [1976], Holbrook isolates a line from an article by Alvarez which stated that once an "extremist" artist reached the intolerable edge of perception, he had "nothing left [to do]--- except to die".12. Holbrook argues that Alvarez is not willing to accept that the concept of the suicidal artist is a "diseased" one. On his part, Holbrook insists on viewing Plath's poetry as precisely that- "the 200 inch distorted mirror", the diseased schizoid vision of separateness.

Plath writes "psychotic poetry" according to Holbrook, a poetry that has as its core, feelings of nostalgia, anger and bitterness. Holbrook suggests that the terrible loss in the poet's life led to an explicitly schizoid condition and to the "fatally false sequence in her logic" which construed death to be "a pathway to

---

11. Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath - Method and Madness, [The Seabury Press, N.York, 1976.],p.11.
12. A.Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, edited by Charles Newman, [Chatto and Windus, London, 1970.], p.67.

rebirth", a means of returning to her dead father.13. Holbrook also sees in Plath's poetry a schizoid's search for love and identification coupled with the knowledge that identification presupposes the possibilitity of abandonment and pain. Thus in a poem like "Kindness", the care and concern offered by others is merely a "poultice" covering the deeply wounded mind of the schizoid who equates kindness with manipulation.

If Plath's poetry is seen in this light, the fabrication of false selves becomes part of the defence mechanism. Butscher too stresses that Plath constructs a framework of false and true selves, what he terms "the bitch-goddess" schism. Both Butscher and Holbrook agree that the golden American girl that Plath tried to project as her "true" self, contrasted sharply with the inner core of violent emotions.

Holbrook brings into question the role of the Plathian reader who is repeatedly confronted with poems whose subject matter is extremely solipsistic. The ontological insecurity that haunts the schizoid's world is, according to Holbrook, a central concern in Plath's poetry. Plath's poetry then demands the reader's entry into the schizoid's "hollow core at the centre of identity".14. The reader becomes the "schizoid's 200-inch astronomical reflector" supplying "what is not

---

13. David Holbrook, Sylvia Plath - Poetry and Existence, [The Athlone Press, London,1976.]; Paperback edition 1988, p.1.
14. David Holbrook, "The 200-inch distorting mirror", New Society [cont. New Statesman and Society], [Jul.11, 1968.], pp.57-58.

there" though more often than not, it involves "false solutions".15. This, according to Holbrook is the tragic shortcoming of Plath's oeuvre.

> Where she suggests that painful efforts have to be made, to reject the conformist self urged on us by "society", and to find our true self--- she is being profound. But where she urges us with rapture to take to the false solutions of hate, rage, and self-destruction, she is pressing her sick logic on us---16.

Holbrook concludes that Plath's poetry as was her suicide is explicable in psychopathological terms except for a few poems like "Swarm" and "Night Dances" which "offer us acute perspectives which enhance our sanity".17.

In poems which lack this acute sense of perception, "she "gives herself over" - to her psychosis and in these moments, the element she most dangerously abandons is the organisational, creative quality--- the "redemptive". In these the same self-defeat which killed the woman also defeats the art by diverting the pursuit of meaning towards a hopeless sensationalism."18.

Paralleling Alvarez's dubbing of Plath's poetry as "murderous art" are the claims of M.L.Rosenthal that Plath was a product of a particularly intense literary movement peculiar to the 1960's.19. According to Rosenthal, the '60's witnessed the arrival of a new group of poets who in a sense revolutionized the existing

---

15. ibid.
16. Sylvia Plath - Poetry and Existence, see op.cit. p.286.
17. ibid, p.287.
18. ibid.
19. See M.L.Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1967.]

literary and critical canons. They wrote intense poetry, training their vision inwards to create verse out of disturbingly private trauma. Rosenthal sees in their radical approach to politicize personal grief, a reaction against the genteel hypocrisy of the Movement poets and novelists like Philip Larkin, Charles Tomlinson and Kingsley Amis. Rosenthal calls these new poets the "Confessional" poets, including in this group, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Theodore Roethke. All of these poets were seen to defy the set literary moulds in that they pioneered in many ways, an extreme form of literary narcissism.

In its obsessive concern with extreme conditions of personal anguish, Confessional poetry is closely aligned with the modalities of Extremist poetry that Alvarez outlined. Poetry "in extremis" however, conspicuously omits questions relating to political and historical consciousness as also the question of poetic responsibility. The poet is not considered as a sociological entity but is glorified as the solipsist supreme. This is not the case with Confessional poetry. Confessional poetry demands that each individual poem becomes a therapeutic exercise, a confession of "sin" and guilt, linking personal vulnerability to the decline of civilization.

> They put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization.20

---

20. ibid, p.79.

In Plath's Ariel poems such as "Getting There", "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", there is a conscious attempt to link personal predicaments with the horror of modern warfare.

> How far is it now?
> The gigantic gorilla interior
> Of the wheels move, they appal me-
> The terrible brains
> Of Krupp, black muzzles
> Revolving, the sound
> Punching out Absence! like cannon.
> It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other
> I am dragging my body.
> ["Getting There"]21.

> Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot---
>
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen---
>
> So, so Herr Doktor
> So Herr enemy,
>
> I am your opus,---
> ["Lady Lazarus"]22.

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen---
> I think I may well be a Jew.
> ["Daddy"]23.

The question is whether this incorporation of private trauma with the war symbol, a motif of societal degradation, has been accomplished in an aesthetically satisfactory manner. There is an ongoing debate that Plath merely uses historical models of mass extinction as extraneous props to depict her sense of privation on a

---

21. Sylvia Plath, "Getting There", in Ariel, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1965.], p.43.
22. "Lady Lazarus", ibid pp.16,18.
23. "Daddy", ibid, p.55.

gigantic scale. It is a scale that borders on hyperbole and exhibitionism. This point of view, if adopted, accuses Plath of choosing rearguard methods of literary escapism. For instance, the reference to Hiroshima or Dachau would immediately play upon the associational resources of the reader who shares with the poet the sense of guilt and vulnerability that warfare has impinged on modern sensibility. Although a useful ploy, guaranteeing the readers' immediate response, this technique murmurs of poetic convenience where context and reference are forced to provide what aesthetic concerns like language or form do not. There are two points of view regarding Plath's use of historical models. While critics like Rosenthal, Charles Newman, A.R.Jones and C.B.Cox state that Plath is successful in the merger, others like Roger Scruton, Alan Williamson, Charles Molesworth and Joyce Carol Oates believe that she failed in her attempt to universalize her personal sorrow.

> Clearly the loss of the father, the ambiguous hand of the mother will remain her central preoccupation. And so she can accept them only by universalizing their memory.24.

Newman sees the interpretation of Plath's work in purely biographical terms as "crude". But where he comes down heavily on the legend of the suicide poet, he unconsciously creates his own version of the Plath myth- that of the mystic poet, the transcendental artist with the "ability to find cosmic truths in the minutiae of

---

24. Charles Newman, "Candor is the only wile", Tri Quarterly, no:7, [Fall, 1966, Womanly Issue.], p.41. The same article also appears in The Art of Sylvia Plath, edited by Charles Newman, [Chatto Windus, London, 1970.]

private life."25. A.R. Jones supports this belief that Plath is able to easily establish a micro-macrocosmic link with "the outer world holding up a mirror in which the inner world can see itself."26. In an article entitled "After the Tranquillized Fifties", Jones together with C.B.Cox analyses the level of objectivity in the poem "Daddy", one of the most open expressions of Plath's sense of deprivation.

> The area of experience on which the poem depends is rawly personal, even esoteric and yet she manages to elevate private facts into public myth and the sheer intensity of her vision lends it a kind of objectivity.27.

Jones and Cox view "Daddy" as an intriguing complex of love and brutality, forces which are seen as interrelated. The article argues brilliantly that "Daddy" constructs a taut bridge between "the persona as suffering victim and the persona as detached discriminating will."28. According to Jones and Cox, "the poem is committed to the view that this ethos of love/ brutality is the dominant historical ethos of the last thirty years."29. They believe that "Daddy" successfully depicts how "the tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of our age", and that it "defines the age as schizophrenic."30. We cannot,

---

25. ibid, p.47.
26. A.R.Jones, "Necessity and Freedom: The poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton", Critical Quarterly, Vol:7, no:1, [Spring, 1965.], p.22.
27. A.R.Jones and C.B.Cox., "After the Tranquillized Fifties: Notes on Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin", Critical Quarterly, Vol:6, no:2, [Summer,1964.], pp.110-111.
28. ibid.
29. ibid, p.112.
30. ibid.

however, overrule a reverse reading of this claim, where the tortured mind of the age is seen as superimposed on personal tragedy in order to make that tragedy seem a historical inevitably rather than the result of a neurotic or schizoid condition.

What then is the position of the reader in this Plathian drama of victimization? Where Holbrook saw the reader as unpleasantly boxed into a nihilistic corner, Jones and Cox see the reader as witness to a redemptive process. Rather than entering the imbalanced world of the schizoid, the reader is finding the means to free himself/herself from a debilitating, neurotic vision.

> The detachment she achieves in this sudden terrifying insight into a private world of suffering and humiliation, far from dragging the reader into a vortex of suffering and humiliation, releases him into a sense of objectivity and freedom from such emotions.31.

By the late '70's and early '80's, Confessional Poetry was attacked as a representation of an "exacerbated sensibility" rather than a "social definition".32.

> The Confessional poets alternately flagellate and flaunt, punish and cosset themselves. They see themselves as victims and heroes - sufferers through their sensitivity, heroic in the suffering ---
> This has produced a particular tone - or range of tones - nervous and hard boiled, whisky slugging and withdrawn, sullen and self pitying.33.

The dangers of extreme solipsism as also the narrowness of subject matter were seen to create a

---

31. ibid, pp.110-111.
32. See Charles Molesworth, The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry, [The University of Missourie Press, Columbia & London, 1979.], pp.73,75.
33. Geoffrey Thurley, The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid-century, [Edward Arnold Ltd., London, 1977.], p.64.

definite problem of identification for the reader. Roger Scruton attacks Plath for her lack of compassion for attitudes other than her own. He claims that her focus on personal suffering is so obsessive that universalising the issue does not arise at all.

"We can feel moved by Sylvia Plath's obsessions without feeling the need to share in them."34.

Alan Williamson in his book titled Introspection and Contemporary Poetry states that there is a willingness that Plath shares with the other Confessional poets to "set the values of universality at risk, in favour of the authenticity of specific autobiography".35. Williamson states that the power that Plath exerts over a reader lies in her ability to make poetry an inroad into intangible inner "states of being" rather than the individual situation of having "been". Yet, as Williamson warns us, her poetry is also a specific emotional autobiography and many details acquire their fullest meaning only when the personal context is provided. Williamson combines the psychoanalytic approach of poetry as therapy with the sociological approach of poetry as a linguistic recreation of the self within society. The war images of "Daddy", "Getting There" and "Lady Lazarus" rather than universalising a moment of private grief, isolates and objectifies that

---

34. Roger Scruton, "Sylvia Plath and the Savage God", in Sylvia Plath - The Critical Heritage, edited by Linda Wagner, [Routledge Critical Series, London, 1988.]
35. Alan Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry, [Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 1984.], p.1.

moment through the technique of literary distancing or disinterestedness.

> They [the poems] manipulate an unacceptable reality in such a way that we accept the statements about others as emotionally inescapable but not therefore as true.36.

Plath's attempt at objectification of experiences has also been decried by critics like Joyce Carol Oates and Charles Molesworth. Molesworth points out that Confessional poets seem to "exhaust the verbal possibilities of the exacerbated sensibility"37. This exhaustion is also seen at the level of subject matter, the narrowness of which displays an over sensitized ego with whom we can sympathise but a while.

> ---as one more psychotic experience, one more terminally ill relative, one more horrendous familial crisis becomes just another trauma--- 38.

Molesworth finds in Plath's poetry a desperate attempt at self definition. He includes Plath in his criticism against the inherent lack of social concern in Confessional poetry.

> It is also a poetry that often relies on a thin and fragmented narrative structure in order to energize itself and this bare bones narration combines with bizarre frequently razor sharp imagery with little or no social definition---39.

Joyce Carol Oates levels against Plath the allegation of extreme inwardness that defeats the Romantic notion of universalising experience. It is the separateness of the "I" rather than its similarity with nature and other people which warrants the poetic treatment of its

---

36. ibid.
37. The Fierce Embrace ---, see op.cit, p.73.
38. ibid, p. 73.
39. ibid, p.75.

traumas. Plath had herself recorded "the polar chill" that had immobilized her when she realised her terrible "separateness" from everything and everyone.

> This stone is a stone. I am I--- My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over.40.

The insecurity of a child who felt suddenly displaced from the affections of her parents, seems to have become in Plath's case, a lasting sense of alienation. It was through poetry then that Plath sought redress.

> I think my poems immediately come out of sensuous and emotional experiences I have--- but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience---41.

Yet it is precisely this "shut-box" failing that Oates finds in Plath's poetry.

> So unquestioningly is the division between selves accepted and so relentlessly the pursuit of the solitary self by way of the form of this poetry, that stasis and ultimate silence seems inevitable--- When the epic promises of "One's-self-I-sing" is mistaken as singing of a separate self and not the universal self, the results can only be tragic.42

Oates's analysis implies that the lack of an integrative process places the reader at a disadvantage, twice removed from the experience at hand. The reader not only has to grapple with an experience distinctly different from any he or she ever felt, but the task is made doubly difficult in that the perceiving "I" itself seems incapable of resolving the experential drama that

---

40. Sylvia Plath, "Ocean 1212-W", in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1977.], p.120.
41. The Poet Speaks, op.cit, pp.169-170.
42. Joyce Carol Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath", in Sylvia Plath - The Critical Heritage, edited by Linda Wagner, [Routledge Critical Heritage Series, London,1988.], p.221.

it presents. As Geoffrey Thurley points out, "often the poet plays dumb insolence, treating the reader as the analyst and making him uncertain about the way he is going to turn next."43. The act of confession presupposes an impartial listener who normally would fill the role of a corrective figure. Confession is prompted by the acceptance of the self's deviation from a conventional pattern of behaviour. Catharsis can be seen as its chief quest. Yet, confession can also be a simple unburdening of sorrow without the actual search for moral rectification. Where then does a Plathian reader take up position? Is the reader doing justice to Plath's poetry in recognising that he or she is actually "overhearing the rasps of a mind that has found its own habitation and need not measure its distance from, even consider its relation to, other minds."44.

As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, a Plathian poem can be fully appreciated only in so far as the reader accepts the shifting irregularities and ambivalences of Plath's poetic curve. Any attempt to resolve the tensions present in the poetry will result in the danger of extrapolation and intentionalism. It is here that I find Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival a useful tool. In the chapters to come, I hope to show that the joyful relativity of the carnival in overturning hierarchies and the acceptance of ambivalences could

---

43. The American Moment, see op.cit, p.64.
44. Irving Howe, "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent", in Sylvia Plath - The Critical Heritage, op.cit, p.232.

prove to be one of the most effective tools in analysing the Plath poem.

Any analysis of Sylvia Plath's poetry necessarily involves contention with the awesome Plath legend. Variously interpreted as martyr, victim and avenger, Plath was also awarded the dubious titles of "priestess", "mystic" and "clairvoyant". The insights offered by Ted Hughes for instance, have had the unfortunate effect of mythicizing Plath into a visionary of sorts. Hughes points out how very little of her poetry was "occasional" and goes on to add-

> She faced a task in herself and her poetry is a record of her progress in this task. Her poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear, even if the origins of it and the dramatis personae, are at the bottom enigmatic.45.

The questions posed by Hughes regards the "task" compelling Plath as a poet and the mythic structure that she employs as a framework for her poems. Hughes does not view this "task" as confessional or even purely autobiographical in nature. The moot point urging confession was, according to Hughes, Plath's "experience of disintegration and renewal". Yet Hughes stresses that for Plath these experiences were portrayed through a series of masks that the dramatic personae donned. Plath's dramatic personae are seen as endowed with "supernatural qualities" endorsing a vision that resembles a "total biological and racial recall."46. The

---

45. Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's poems", Tri Quarterly, no:7, [Fall, 1966, Womanly Issue.], p.81.
46. ibid.

poet who engenders verse of such depth must needs be a clairvoyant herself - a priestess and shamana.

> The world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, clairvoyance, metamorphoses---
> ---and the whole scene lies under the transfiguring eye of the great white timeless light. Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way clairvoyance and mediumship do: her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them.47.

Hughes firmly lodges her poetry within psychic fields of exploration and in so doing, makes of the poet, a high priestess; of the plot, a dramatic search for transcendence; of the personae, a "medium" for extra sensory perception and of the reader, a telepathic double, sharing the experience of "ascent". However, there is in Hughes's argument an inherent questioning of the quality of this transcendental experiment.

> In her poetry--- she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men and more recently flung open to tourists with the passport of such hallucinogens as LSD.48.

If the mystical experience is equated to the hallucinatory effects of an LSD dose, the reader is placed in the very difficult position of having to distinguish the true spiritual moment of upliftment from the false moment of escapism.

Robert Lowell and Stephen Spender also question the position of the Plathian reader. Lowell argues that Plath played a dangerous game, precariously poised between life and death. He speaks of Plath's "controlled

---

47. ibid, pp.81-82.
48. ibid, p.82.

hallucination" and provides the striking image of the poems as "playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder".49. Spender, on the other hand, views Plath's poetry as prophetic, providing the reader with "warnings from the grave".50. Spender praises Plath's "controlled uncontrolledness", where hysteria, which he views as a "feminine" failing is here "cultivated" into a universal aesthete of the highest order. Both Lowell and Spender see Plath as eschewing immanence in favour of either the Dionysian role of the poet as victim or the Vatic role of the poet as seer.

There is, however, a sense of excess in Spender's claim that "Plath is writing out of a pure need of expression, certified--- by death.51. It veers close to Alvarez'z view that poetry of the kind that Sylvia Plath wrote, is logically complete only in the physical example of the artist's suicide. Unlike both Alvarez and Spender, Hughes does not view the death wish as the dominant motif of Plath's poetry. He speaks of her work as a quest for uniting the "Baraka" element- i.e. the "flame" of hatred and the "rose" of love. Hughes is of the opinion that in Plath's poetry, these two elements combined as never before forming a strangely beautiful coalition between "the nature, the poetic genius and the active self".52.

---

49. See Robert Lowell's Foreword to Plath's Ariel, [Harper & Row, N.York, 1966.], pp.vii-ix.
50. See Stephen Spender, "Warnings from the Grave", New Republic, [Jun.18, 1966.], pp.23-26.
51. ibid.
52. "Notes on the Chronological Order ---, op.cit, p.82.

In poems like "Mystic", "Years" and "The Munich Mannequins", the issues of transcendence and immanence are weighed along with their associational implications of birth, death, action and stasis. It is the nature of tranquillity that is quite mercilessly examined.

"Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?"
["Mystic"]53.

Eternity bores me
I never wanted it.

What I love is
The piston in motion-
My soul dies before it.---

And you, great Stasis-
What is so great in that!
["Years"]54.

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.---

The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.
["The Munich Mannequins"]55.

All three poems pose a "mill of hooks", the real "hook" or query being whether transcendence can effectively be incorporated within the boundaries of domestic life. As Hughes points out, the incessant questioning and dropping over conceptual bridges is contrasted with the tender attachment to the here and the now. If Plath is warning readers, as Spender would have us believe, it is against the excessive glamourization of issues such as transcendence and mystic calm. Lowell, who viewed

---

53. Sylvia Plath, "Mystic", in Winter Trees, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1971.], p.26.
54. "Years", Ariel, op.cit, p.73.
55. "The Munich Mannequins", ibid, p.74.

"Mystic" as one of Plath's finest poems, feels that the dilemma posed in the poem is one that concerns the harmonising of ecstasy and normality. Lowell argues that a mystic's insights bring him pain, with little or no possibility of fulfilment. While this argument may be accepted, his standpoint that the end of the poem witnesses a reluctant return to the day and its muted beauty is a contentious one.

> Does the sea
>
> Remember the walker upon it?
> Meaning leaking from the molecules.
> The chimney of the city breathe, the window sweats,
> The children leap in their cots.
> The sun blooms, it is a geranium.
>
> The heart has not stopped.56.

Far from seeming reluctant, the return seems voluntary, necessitated by the realization that it is "the blood flood", "the flood of love" that is negated in the mystic's "terrible" perfection. It is the poetry of the here and the now that Plath celebrates. As Hughes indicates, "ecstasy" was one of Plath's favourite words, though it had nothing to do with the saint's ecstatic detachment but everything to do with the individual "sinner's" attachment to temporaneity.

This "saint-sinner" equation is further developed by critics like Judith Kroll, Marjorie Perloff and Jon Rosenblatt. The "sinning" self, seen as the false *doppelganger*, grapples with the "true", inner self in an unending drama of initiation. The poet, now becomes the initiator of a complex ritual of birth and death; the

---

56. "Mystic", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.26.

dramatic personae are involved in a complicated shedding off of "false" selves; the plot becomes a highly stylised ritual, conveying the effect of this initiatory process and finally the reader becomes first a voyeur and then a participant in this initiatory drama of life-in-death and death-in-life.

Kroll regards Plath's poetry as "an articulation of a mythic system which integrates all aspects of her work and into which autobiographical or confessional details are shaped and absorbed, greatly qualifying how such elements ought to be viewed."57. By placing the emphasis on the "mythic system", Kroll gives to Plath's poetry the contradictory ability to be both empathetic and detached. No doubt the poetic concerns are still obsessively narrow, but the poet is no longer seen as a harbinger of death. The desire for death is replaced by the double ritual of rebirth and transcendence. Kroll contrasts Plath with Lowell and Sexton. Where Lowell and Sexton exhibit an extremely intense personal voice, drawing vitality from the very incompleteness of their vision, Plath is absorbed in a "timeless mythic system", completely self-contained in a foreclosed sense of mythic totality.

Kroll traces Plath's indebtedness to Robert Graves's The White Goddess and to James Frazer's The Golden Bough, both of which helped her create her own Mythic Muse. Three motifs are of vital importance according to Kroll:

---

57. Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology, [Harper & Row Pub., N.York, 1976.], p.2.

1.The male as "god" and as "devil". Hence the male is a "bag full of God" or Nazi vampire, e.g. "Daddy".

2.The "true" and the "false" selves- e.g. "There are two of us now"-["In Plaster"]; the shedding off of the false self and the rise of the new- e.g. "I shall unloose---" ["Purdah"]; "Out of the ash/ I rise---" ["Lady Lazarus"].

3.Death-in-life and Life-in-death or Death and Rebirth.

"How in such mild air/ The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out."- ["Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows"];

"I smile, a buddha, all/ Wants, desire/ Falling from me like rings---" ["Paralytic"].

"The woman is perfected.---" ["Edge"].

To deal with these three major motifs, Plath evolved her Moon Muse incorporating the qualities of the Triple-Moon Goddess [life, death and rebirth] that Graves discussed and those of the Demon of the Waxing/Waning Year that Frazer emphasised, [death and resurrection of the vegetative deities]. Kroll therefore sees Plath's "Three Women" as representative of the principal phases of the Triple Goddess mourning her "God"; "The Rival", "Lesbos" and "The Other" become portrayals of how the "God" is lost to another. Interestingly enough, Kroll points out that in Plath's poetry, the rival is not merely the "other" woman but has a "mythic oppositeness embodying a rival way of being".58. Hence the poems on childlessness as opposed to motherhood-

> The womb
> Rattles its pod, the moon
> Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.

---

58. ibid, p.69.

["Childless Woman"]59.

"Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful
thing."
["Child"] 60.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to
listen:---

Your handful of notes;
["Morning Song"]61.

Poems on barrenness as opposed to fertility-

And around her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, fist, threat
Or love, either.
["Spinster"]62.

Widow. The bitter spider sits
And sits in the centre of her loveless spokes.
Death is the dress she wears,---
["Widow"]63.

On the green hill, under the thorn trees,
They listen for the millenium,
The knock of the small, new heart.
["Heavy Women"]64.

Kroll cites Graves as the inspirational force behind the two most powerful images in Plath's poetry- the spider and the queen bee.

A true poem is necessarily an invocation of the white Goddess or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust- the female spider or the queen bee whose embrace is death.65

---

59. "Childless Woman", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.16.
60. "Child", ibid, p.12.
61. "Morning Song", Ariel, op.cit, p.11.
62. Sylvia Plath, "Spinster", in The Colossus, [Faber & Faber Ltd, London, 1967 edition.], pp.59-60.
63. Sylvia Plath, "Widow", in Crossing the Water, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1971.], p.38.
64. "Heavy Women", ibid, p.37.
65. Robert Graves, The White Goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth, [London, 1948.], p.24.

The spider with its many arms representing "Death with its many sticks"66, and the "upflight of the murderess" bee 67, become the main motifs of the mythic structure that emphasises symbolic death, rebirth and transcendence. e.g poems like "Totem", "Paralytic" and "Mystic". In all three poems the poet/persona, even while being enamoured by the concept of transcending the self, is nonetheless uneasy of an experience that demands simultaneously, the obliteration of the self. "Meaning leaks from the molecules"68, and hence must continually be recreated according to Kroll.

Kroll views Plath's later poems like "Edge" and "Words" as distinctly oriented by Eastern philosophies, particularly the Hindu belief of the non-self and the Buddhist doctrine of the evolution of the selves and the subsequent freedom from the cycle of rebirth. A continuous re-reading however, disallows the label of "transcendentalism" to be applied to Plath's poetry. It is precisely the lack of resolution, the "mill of hooks" that makes her poetry exciting.

Jon Rosenblatt refutes Kroll's attribution of a mystical angle to Plath's poetry although he does agree on the point that Plath uses a mythic structure in most of her poems.

Plath's later poetry cannot be explained as "mystical" or "transcendent" poetry. To read her very last poems like "Edge" and "Words" as examples of a transcendent

---

66. "Totem", Ariel, op.cit, p.77.
67. "The Bee Meeting", ibid, p.61.
68. "Mystic", Crossing the Water, op.cit, p.26.

perspective is to ignore the obvious despair and sense of failure that informs them.69

He states that in Plath's poetry "the central development was an initiation, a transformation of the self from a state of symbolic death to one of rebirth."70. He traces Plath's development as a poet along the curve of the "initiatory imagination". Plath's work is no longer seen "as biography, but as her desire to enact an initiatory transformation through art".71. Hence in The Colossus, the initiatory imagination speaks of "the fear of physical harm and death, motherhood and the poet's sense of an emerging selfhood--- a dynamic vision of the battle between self and others, self and nature".72. In Crossing the Water, this imagination steadily moulds landscape and seascape into "a correlative for both psychic forces described in the poems and a source of images".73.In the final poems of Winter Trees and Ariel, "the self finds situations and dramatic forms that objectify the battle between life and death forces".74. Plath's dual obsession with annihilation and salvation are therefore worked out into a life and death pattern. Rosenblatt is of the opinion that although Plath's later poems develop out of immediate, true life experiences, they only use autobiography as a sounding board. It is the dramatic enactment of autobiography that gives to

---

69. Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath - The Poetry of Initiation, [The Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1979.], See Preface.
70. ibid.
71. ibid.
72. ibid.
73. ibid.
74. ibid.

Plath's poetry a sense of significance and scope. Plath's brilliance lies in her ability to "re-order personal experience into patterns that obtain an objective character through repetition, allusion and symbolic enactment--- the obsessive personal elements of fear; love and death, the autobiographical incidents, serve the same function that the "impersonal" elements of history, politics and myth do in other poetry. They provide an action and character, define a setting and generate a cluster of images and ideas."75. Plath's poetry, especially the later poetry, is seen as a drama wherein the personae don innumerable poses in relation to birth and death, to physical mutilation, to children and to the family. There are also many different listeners within this initiatory drama- children, family members, quasi mythological figures like the Rival, the other, Medusa, and "non human objects", trees, bees and even split off parts of the poet's body.76. The heightened voice in these poems, often bordering on hysteria or on the deadly calm of anguish, is warranted by the dramatic initiatory framework of the poems themselves. In a nutshell, this framework involves a three-fold movement- descent into darkness; ritual death; and rebirth. In poems wherein these dramatic stages are incomplete - for example in "Edge" or in "Words", - the result is an aesthetic failure.

---

75. ibid, Chapter-1, p.15.
76. ibid, see p.23.

Marjorie Perloff argues that Plath's poetry is a working out of the "angst-animism" complex with no pretensions to historical or political leanings. Perloff is not interested in reviewing any underlying structural coherence, unlike critics such as Kroll and Rosenblatt. Instead, she insists on a certain emotional coherence in Plath's poetry. It is a coherence that is conditioned by extreme anxiety or deep pleasure. Perloff uses the term "angst" to refer to anxiety or "fear without an object".77 This anxiety stems from an acknowledgement of separateness, from the awareness that the chasm between the self and the other, between the self and nature, is an unbridgeable one. "Animism" on the other hand, represents "pity without an object"78, the ecstatic realization of oneness with the universe. Objects that are non-human are also therefore invested with a life of their own, with attributes that are human.

Perloff sees Plath's poetry as "oracular" poetry where "catharsis" is replaced by "ecstasis". The poet becomes the medium of the oracle "rapt in self-communion" although "angst" and "animism" create "moods which are common to the work of art and to the reader--- which bind them together psychologically, instead of separating them aesthetically".79. As an example of "angst", Perloff cites "Morning Song" where love and anxiety combine at the child's birth. "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are seen

77. Marjorie Perloff, "Angst and Animism in the poetry of Sylvia Plath", Journal of Modern Literature, Vol:1, nos:1-3, [1970-71.], pp.57-74.
78. ibid.
79. ibid.

as the isolated "separateness" of the self from the outer world, while "Ariel" is seen as an example of animism which seeks to unite the speaker with the central experience. Plath's success as a poet, according to Perloff, lies in her ability to combine the elements of "angst" and "animism". "Tulips" is one such example where the anguish of the speaker is bound up with personality with which she endows the bunch of flowers- "Nobody watched me before, now I am watched./--- The vivid tulips eat my oxygen."80.

Perloff believes that Plath does not share a historical perspective with the reader in the way that Robert Lowell did. Lowell was able to draw his readers' into a viewing of the decline of an entire civilization through the narration of his own life story. Plath, according to Perloff, was unable to do this. Rather than viewing this as an inherent failing in the poet, Perloff sees it as a natural spin-off of "oracular poetry", the kind that Plath specialised in.

> For the oracular poet, past and future are meaningless abstractions--- For Sylvia Plath, there is only the given moment, only now.81.

The least successful poems are therefore those that seek to merge private and public horror, poems like "Swarm" or "Getting There" for instance.

While Kroll, Rosenblatt and Perloff view Plath's poetry as essentially redemptive, critics like Anthony Libby, Charles Molesworth and Motlu Konuk Blasing speak

---

80 "Tulips", Ariel, op.cit, p.21.
81. "Angst and Animism---" op.cit.

of Plath's innate mood for annihilation over restoration. The underlying imaginative thrust of the poetry is itself seen to be negative. Molesworth states that "in the poetry of Plath and Sexton, we find not only the subject matter, but also the very structure of their imagination returning again and again to an irreducible choice. Haunted by the failed myth of a human or at least artistic perfectability, they turned to a courtship of nihilism".82

Blasing sees Plath as a poet "fallen from grace", for, rather than any upsurging image of transcendence, the poetry seems to embody a "fall into substitutive satisfactions".83. As such it enfolds the knowledge of otherness, of separations, of difference. The sensational, histrionic language is "aimed at the nerves and directed at effects".83. According to Blasing, Plath presents a "self destructive process of expression" that records the failure of her formalism.84. A poem like "Words", for example, spells defeat where language alienates rather than affording the reader with a point of identification.

The strongest critique of the claims to "transcendental" leanings in Plath's poetry comes from Anthony Libby. Libby states that Plath's is "immersion

---

82. The Fierce Embrace, op.cit, p.64.
83. Motlu Konuk Blasing, American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms, [Yale University Press, 1987.], p.50.
83. ibid, p.51.
84. ibid, p.62.

mysticism" rather than the mysticism of transcendence.85. Briefly put, immersion mysticism implies a search for transcendence in immanence. As the union is inherently ironic, so is the poetry. Libby points out that a poem like "Edge" affords neither the sense of liberation that Kroll sees in it nor is it an idolization of infanticide as is Holbrook's view. Instead it is a piece pervaded with irony.

> The discussion of Plath's attitude towards death--- and of Plath as a mystic must never lose sight of her pervasive irony. She does finally write visionary poetry--- The problem is not the degree of her morbidity, or fascination with death for its own sake, but her cynicism; mystics are often fascinated with death but seldom so given to callous jokes about transcendence.86.

Libby represents the diametrical opposition to Kroll's idea of Plath's "Moon Muse". Transcendence, if any, is overshadowed by "Sycorax. mother of Caliban" who "looms behind the ascent to triumphant union".87. For Plath, "identification with the destructive Mother dominates her mystical imagination" and she is seen as "internalizing the apocalypse" thereby becoming "both avenger and victim".88.

Interestingly enough, Plath herself lent an unconscious hand to legend-making. Her Letters Home [pub.1976, ed . Aurelia Plath.], reveal the carefully formulated "Sivvy" image of the model daughter, the ace student, proudly presenting her mother with a record of

---

85. See Anthony Libby, Mythologies of Nothing: Mystic Death in American Poetry, 1940-'70, [Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1984.].
86. ibid, p.127.
87. ibid, p.148.
88. ibid, pp.148-149.

her personal successes. In contrast the intimate journal entries, [pub. as The Journals of Sylvia Plath, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, 1982.], portray the dark side of the American Dream of success. Full of doubts and fears, the aggressive journal entries act as an interesting intertext to much of Plath's poetry. This has been discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Since the late 1960's there has been a growing trend of analysing Plath's poetry in the light of contemporary feminist theory. Taking a broad overview, such a mode of analysis deals with certain definite concerns such as the quest for identity; the denial of a patriarchal conceptual framework in favour of a matriarchal experential one; the question of polarization, "otherness" and victimization; the vital issues of forging a "feminine" language to mirror uniquely female experiences, like the experience of motherhood, for instance; the creation of a new literature, a poetics of anger.

Plath's poetic output, stretching from The Colossus to Ariel, embodies both the protestation against and the imitation of the patriarchal structures of language. The Colossus, viewed as Plath's "apprentice" work portrays a loyal imitation of patriarchal forerunners- Lowell, Stevens, Frost, Lawrence and Hughes. Speaking to Peter Orr, Plath readily admitted to the influence of poets like Dylan Thomas, W.B.Yeats and Auden on her work and of the "breakthrough" that Robert Lowell's Life Studies offered her.

> I've been very excited about what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo.89.

That Plath was against the male stereotype of the woman poet as emotionally highstrung and lacking in formal control, is seen in her determined effort to avoid the brittle "feminine" voice of sentimentality. This was done first through concerted experiments with form and through a deliberate imitation of the voices and techniques of literary, male predecessors. The movement from imitation to a search for a distinct self narrative is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

The popular concept of woman's subservience as also the wall flower image receives sarcastic treatment.

> --- Here is a hand
>
> To fill it and willing
> To bring teacups and roll away headaches
> And do whatever you tell it.
> Will you marry it?---
>
> It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
> Against fire and bombs through the roof.
> ["The Applicant"]90.

There is not in Plath, the feminist denial of well established patriarchal literary frameworks if only to assert a pure matrilineal line of descent. There is, however in her writing, the search for uniting language and experience and to form a poetic mode of utterance that would authorise this union in specifically feminist terms. There are certain explicitly feminist issues that can be traced in Plath's poetry. For example:

---

89. The Poet Speaks, op.cit, pp.167-168.
90. "The Applicant", Ariel, op.cit, p.14.

1. The demolition of patriarchal conditioning- e.g. "Daddy"-

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years,---

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.91.

2. Horizontal hostility or rivalry between women themselves- e.g. "The Rival", "Lesbos"-

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
You leave the same impression
Of something beautiful, but annihilating.
Both of you are great light borrowers.
Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is
unaffected,92.

Viciousness in the kitchen!---

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.---

Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet.93.

3. The ambiguous nature of the mother-daughter relationship with its complex matrix of love and hate. e.g. "Medusa"-

My mind winds to you
Old barnacled umblicus,---

I didn't call you.---
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers.---

There is nothing between us.94.

---

91. "Daddy", Ariel, op.cit, p.54;56.
92. "The Rival", Ariel, op.cit, p.53.
93. "Lesbos", Winter Trees, op.cit, pp.34,35,36.
94. "Medusa", Ariel, op.cit, pp.45,46.

4. The power of the female community and the expulsion of the masculine element that causes fear. Plath's "bee poems" ["The Bee-Keeper's Daughter", "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box", "Stings" and "Wintering"] are the finest example of the search for a new social order, a new language. The queen bee becomes the symbol of resurgence and womanly power. As Nelly Furman points out, the bee metaphor offers an immediate conceptual bridge to many tasks that are exclusively feminine - "the bee's fiction would be rich and broad, full of complex tasks of comb-building and filling, the care and feeding of the young--- It would treat the vast fecundity of motherhood, the educative and selective processes of group mothers, and the passion of loyalty, of social service which holds the hives together."95.

5. The use of body language i.e. the body is used as a storehouse of images and metaphors. Alicia Suskin Ostriker in a study of language as representative of the female condition, states that

"Plath's work is filled with body images both internal and external- skin, blood, skulls, feet, mouth etc---"96. This is true of poems such as "Tulips", "Poem for a Birthday", Poppies in October", "Poppies in July". An explicitly female function like menstruation is used in Plath's poetry to equate the biological and poetic reproductive processes. Both processes are seen as acts

---

95. Nelly Furman, "The Study of Women and Language - Comment on Vol:3; no:3", Signs,4, [Fall,1978.] p.184.

96. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America, [The Women's Press Ltd., London, 1987.], p.99.

of love. "The blood flood is the flood of love."97; "The blood jet is poetry,/ There's no stopping it."98. Images of flesh and blood being manipulated by a doctor figure is also very common in Plath, for example in poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Getting There", "Surgeon at 2 a.m.", "Stones" in "Poem for a Birthday", "Fever 103".

Ostriker points out that along with this body awareness, Plath is seen to share with most feminist writers, the use of an exoskeletal style. This kind of style eschews the musicality that lyrical poetry insists upon. In a poet like Plath, this musicality is replaced by an incantatory effect. ["You do not do, you do not do"- "Daddy"; "Up to my neck/ Thick, thick"- "Lesbos"; "I do it so it feels like hell./ I do it so it feels real."- "Lady Lazarus".] What is important about this kind of style with reference to Plath, is that control, dispassionateness, parody, mockery and a conscious stressing of power over beauty in terms of images, become prerequisites to writing poetry. Hence the parodying tone of "The Applicant"; the theatricality of "Lady Lazarus"; the mockery seeping through "A Tour" and the steely implacability of "Edge". As Ostriker points out, this metallic toughness of the poems could well be a case of "aggressive-defensiveness"99 because "the woman poet who adopts an impermeable tone is less in danger of being

---

97. "The Munich Mannequins", Ariel, op.cit, p.74.
98. "Kindness", Ariel, op.cit, p.83.
99. Stealing the Language---, op.cit, p.87.

dismissed as sentimental or over- emotional by critics".100.

6. There is in Plath's poetry a movement towards a poetics of anger - for example, poems against the male oppressor, either the husband, lover or the father- "Daddy"; "The Rabbit Catcher";

Poems reflecting the image of men as cold or inorganic- "Three Women"; "Magi";

Poems linking the patriarchal system and God- "The Colossus"; "The Hanging Man";

Poems inverting the plot of victimization- "Purdah"; "Daddy";

Poems displaying suicide as an act of liberation- "Edge"; "Lady Lazarus".

Ostriker sees these anger poems as the complex derivative of the war of the sexes. Suzanne Juhasz points out how these anger poems challenge the established patriarchal structures of language and society.

> It is the poetry whose poet speaks as a woman, so that the form of her poem is an extension of herself.--- A poetry that is revolutionary because by expressing the vision of real women, it challenges the patriarchal premises of society.101.

That the 1950's ideals of womanhood, marriage and the home mattered to Plath is very clear in her Letters Home. Yet her poems and journal entries definitely depict a sense of rebellion against these set patriarchal norms. Liz Yorke in a recent study points out that Plath's

---

100. ibid.

101. Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition, [Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row Pub., N.York, 1976.], p.205.

poetry portrays a struggle to bring to language the representation of "the fury of her female rebellion".

Her subversive dedication to the repressed past - her project of reminiscence and retrieval of female rage, the fury of her female rebellion and the eventual articulation within the poems of bitter female despair- all fiercely transgress traditional decorums of the "feminine" woman poet. Her illicit poetic repeatedly brings to consciousness what fifties' and sixties' respectability would have wished silenced, excluded and suppressed.102.

Yorke discusses Plath's poetry in the light of current feminist theories of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva and, in so doing, evaluates the relationship between the female writer, her desire and the structures of language. In another recent study, Jacqueline Rose argues that fantasy is a crucial element without which we cannot understand Plath's work and the myth that she has come to represent. Rose comments, interestingly, on how Plath haunts our culture, raising questions of the legitimate scope of literary interpretation, "a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels.--- Execrated and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal.103.

In the chapters that follow, I concentrate on the way in which Plath represents the ambiguities of the female role through her poetry. This involves a study of the various textual travesties that the Plath text offers- [parody, masquerade, elements of black humour, to name a

102. Liz Yorke, Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry, [Routledge, London, N.York, 1991.], p.50.
103. Jacqueline Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, [Virago Press Ltd, London, 1991.], p.1.

few]-in order to unsettle the established hierarchies of language. It is my contention that, the reader most willing to accept rather than resolve ambivalences, the "carnivalesque" reader, is the one that appreciates the Plathian poem best.

"BECOMING ANOTHER"- WRITING AND IDENTITY

Open-mouthed, the baby god ---
Cried out for the mother's dug.
The dry volcanoes cracked and spit,

Sand abraded the milkless lip.
Cried then for the father's blood ---

Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch
Raised his men of skin and bone,
Barbs on the crown of gilded wire,
Thorns on the bloody rose-stem.1

In Plath's first volume of poetry, The Colossus, it is the shadow of the patriarch that falls across the written word. Yet there is enough room to contemplate the nature of the mother-bond. The focus, in this first volume, is on creating a narrative for the self through a conscious attempt at questioning the exact impact of filial bonding. Literary voices and personal reminiscences coalesce as the contours of the self are shaped in relation to both the M[O]ther's approval and the Father's Law.2

---

1 Sylvia Plath, "I Want, I Want", in The Colossus, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London,1967.], p.28.

2 Jacques Lacan discusses the nature of personality and the interrelationship between speech and desire. See Lacan's Ecrits: A Selection, translated by Alan Sheridan, [Tavistock Publications, London, 1977]; The Language of the Self - The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis, translated by Anthony Wilden, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1968]; The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, translated by Alan Sheridan, [The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1977]. According to Lacan, when about a year old, the pre-linguistic child intuits an image of itself as a unified being. There is an inherent discrepancy between the child's belief in an ideal unity and the absence of it. This discrepancy is made most obvious when the child is initiated into speech. The human individual sets out with certain specific needs that are certified by certain

In an early journal entry, Plath had recorded the need to invest herself in her texts

> I felt if I didn't write nobody would accept me as a human being. Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don't love me, love my writing and love me for my writing.3

If writing is seen as the substitute for the self, the self is seen using words to measure its relationship with the Other. The question of "otherness" is an important one in The Colossus as the persona/self negotiates the gap separating it from sources of nature and nurture alike. The Colossus explores two separate moments of

---

objects. Of these needs, the most primal is the need for nourishment and sustenance. The first object to whom this demand is addressed is the Mother. According to Lacan, "all speech is demand; it presupposes the Other to whom it is addressed --- By the same token, that which comes from the Other is treated not so much as a particular satisfaction of a need, but rather as a response to an appeal, a gift, a token of love." [The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, op.cit, p.278]. The Mother's approval is therefore equated with an acceptance and confirmation of the Self. Lacan's view of subjectivity is both intrapersonal and interpersonal. The child acquires an intrinsic opposite, the critic within, symbolized as the "petit a", as well as a conditioning factor, an extrinsic opposite, symbolized as the "grand Autre", the capitalized Other. This "grand Autre" could be the Mother or society at large, representing the alter ego to the self, and/or the persecutor without. Lacan states that "desire" takes shape in the gap between the Self's need and demand for a response/ approval from this social and biological Other. The Father-figure in Lacan's analyses is represented as "le nom du pere", [the name-of-the-father], in whom "we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which, from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the Law." [The Language of the Self---, op.cit, p.41]. "Le nom du pere" refers not to the real father, or the imaginary father, [the paternal imago], but to the Symbolic father to whom the subject binds himself for life. [The Four Fundamental Concepts---, op.cit, p.282].

3 The Journals of Sylvia Plath, edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, [Ballantyne Books, N.York,1982.], p.280. [Henceforth referred to as J.].

tension. On the one hand, the persona is seen locked in a struggle with the environment whose strangeness she attempts to evade rather than confront. On the other hand, there is the unresolved tension of relationships. Dissatisfied with the distant, implacable father-figure; uncertain of the mother-bond, the persona attempts to "empty" herself and then reconstruct.

> The vase, reconstructed, houses
> The elusive rose. ---
>
> I shall be good as new.4

The Colossus reads like an attempt by the persona to free herself from the shackles of uncertainties and fears that largely remain unnamed. What is important to note is that this impulse is carefully forged into well-worn literary forms coupled with a careful choice of elite, often esoteric vocabulary. Words like "cuirass", "pellicle", "bole", "descant", "bruit", "ichor", "wraith", "casque" are carefully strewn about the volume. This is the language of the Thesaurus, one that Hughes reminds us, [in his "Notes on the Chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems" - Tri-Quarterly, No:7, Fall, 1966; Womanly Issue - p.82.], was always on Plath's knee while writing The Colossus. Emphasis is often on verbal and metrical energy and on difficult verse forms.

> Where the three magenta
> Breakwaters take the shove
> And suck of the grey sea
>
> To the left, and the wave
> Unfists against the dun
> Barb-wired headland of

---

4 "Poem for a Birthday", The Colossus, op.cit, p.79.

The Deer Island prison ---5

J.D.McClatchy terms this "well wrought poetics", a collection that "betrays the novice's self-consciousness."

> The Colossus is not merely the poetry of an ambitious but cautious beginner; it is the summary of the prevalent mode and Plath's imagination, though equal to its forms and discretions, was *not yet strong enough to assert a personality apart from a mimed voice.* She follows the rules of the game, and generally set low stakes.6[italics my own.]

Nature in The Colossus takes on the masculine dimensions of power and domination, and it seems to threaten and erode the female onlooker. Poems which display this sense of unease are "Hardcastle Crags", "Point Shirley", "Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows", "Man in Black", "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour", "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond". The confrontation with the alien forces of Nature is initiated by a movement away from self-definition. This is accomplished by adopting the voices of literary forefathers. It is an act of mimesis7 which helps to keep terror in check, while bringing in a "sense of threat", as though the poet "were continually menaced by something she could see only out of the corners of her eyes".8

---

5 "Man in Black", ibid, p.46.
6 J.D.McClatchy, "Short Circuits and Folding Mirrors", in Modern Critical Views - Sylvia Plath, edited by Harold Bloom, [Chelsea House Pub., N.York, & Philadelphia,1989.], p.81.
7 At this point, I mean imitation and not the Irigarayan idea of mimesis as "a strategic and economic resource of subversion". [See Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray - Philosophy in the Feminine, [Routledge, 1991.], p.135.
8 A.Alvarez, "The Poet and the Poetess", The Observer, [18, December, 1960.], p.12.

In "Hardcastle Crags", the persona speaks of "the humped indifferent iron" of the Yorkshire hills and indicates the impenetrable nature of the surroundings in which she finds herself, in a remarkably Hughes-like voice.

> The whole landscape
> Loomed absolute as the antique world was
> Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,
> Unaltered by eyes,
>
> Enough to snuff the quick
> Of her small heat out.9

In "Point Shirley", the persona speaks with nostalgia about her grandmother and matches the tragic impermanence of Man with the seeming indifference of Nature. The hostility of the natural world is highlighted with the sea as the overpowering image of a predatory, corrosive force.

> Grey waves the stub-necked eiders ride.
> A labour of love, and that labour lost.
> Steadily the sea
> Eats at Point Shirley.10

The rapacity of the sea is reminiscent of Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket", while the sense of nostalgia expressed in the poem finds close alignment with Lowellian poems such as "In Memory of Arthur Winslow" and "Mary Winslow".11 Echoes of Hopkins and Lawrence ring through the poem, making it a strange conglomeration of literary voices. "Suicide off Egg

---

9 "Hardcastle Crags", The Colossus, op.cit, p.9.
10 "Point Shirley", ibid, p.17.
11 "Point Shirley" was written in 1959, around the time when Plath attended Lowell's poetry writing classes. According to Hughes, this poem is "a deliberate exercise in Robrt Lowell's early style". See Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems", [Tri-Quarterly, No:7, Fall, 1966, Womanly Issue.], p.84.

Rock" seems to be another experiment in Lowell's early style. According to Steven Axelrod, in these poems, Plath "adopted Lowell's clotted syntax, his tone of aggrieved aggression, his vocabulary of combers, spindrift, squalls and sluttish, rutted sea."12 Axelrod analyses not just The Colossus but Plath's entire oeuvre as an "agonistic" text expressing what Harold Bloom termed "the anxiety of influence".13 Hence the reading of every Plathian poem becomes an act of "misprision" requiring a displacement of literary godfathers. Although I hesitate in reading all of Plath's writing in this light, I agree that The Colossus does reveal a preoccupation with literary voices. This technique of alluding to voices other than her own, often leaves the persona of the poem in a strange sort of vacuum. Despite the very real feeling of desolation in poems like "Point Shirley, one cannot quite shake off the effect of this being a contrived exercise in literary scholarship.

Nature, in The Colossus is seen as predatory and malignant beneath its veneer of amiability. Such is the theme of "Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows". The persona/speaker, tries to carve out a point of stasis amidst flux by attempting to ground herself in detailed descriptions of the natural landscape. During the course of the poem however, the persona argues that human love,

---

12 Steven Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London,1990.], p.65.

13 See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1973].

academic skills, or a reliance on Nature could offer no solace.

> Hedging meadows of benign
> Arcadian green
> The blood-berried hawthorn hides its spines with white.14

The mind in search of Arcadian pastures is therefore continually reminded by the submerged yet seething unconscious of the external threats that make these pastures either unattainable, or if attained, inviolate. Both in "Man in Black" and in "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond", [Section 5 of "Poem for a Birthday".], the persona is seen fixed in an alien universe where "hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank/ Dominion"15 and men are but "puppets, loosed from the strings of the/ puppet-master."16 The reference to similar connotations of disintegration in Yeat's "Second Coming" is unmistakable.

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.17

Plath, however, is unable to depict the Yeatsian sense of cosmic disorder. Her difficulty at this stage of development as a writer, is that she has still not found a voice suitable enough to represent her personal sense of alienation from a cosmic order. The fascination with a violent cosmic order, a recurrent theme in Hughes's poetry, is transmuted in Plath's into a recognition of

---

14 "Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows", The Colossus, op.cit, p.29.
15 "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond", in "Poem for a Birthday", ibid, p.76.
16 ibid.
17 W.B.Yeats, "The Second Coming", in The Collected Poems, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London,1960.] p.142.

violence at the root of being and the subsequent sense of fear and helplessness. Unlike Lowell's personae, the persona in The Colossus does not seek to view herself as the microcosm of external detail. Instead a sharp sense of alienation is felt in a persona who intrudes upon rather than appreciates Nature. "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour" offers an insight into this dilemma. The persona is on a beach in the early hours of the morning, observing crabs while she collects mussels. Amidst the strange living organisms on the beach, the persona feels oddly shut out, alone in a "wary otherworld"18

> --- I
> Stood shut out, for once, for all,
> Puzzling the passage of their
> Absolutely alien
> Order as I might puzzle
> At the clear tail of Halley's
> Comet coolly giving my
> Orbit the go-by, ---19

The pantheistic credo is distinctly absent in Plath's poetry and hence we are confronted with a persona/self for whom the universe remains an enigma, hostile rather than mysteriously exciting. At its best, The Colossus is the self's apprehension of the natural world as it evaluates its relationship with the external surroundings that condition its response. Often, the analysis tilts in favour of locating possible ways of distancing and controlling the dilemma by intellectualizing the issues at hand. How effective then, are the literary postures that the persona/self adopts in The Colossus? Are the

---

18 "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour", The Colossus, op.cit, p.62.
19 ibid, pp.63-64.

rigours of difficult versification and stylised diction attempts to "control and manipulate experience, even the most terrifying --- with an informed and intelligent mind"20? Or are these self imposed rigours simply methods of escape, justifying an emotional response through vocalizations by the literary, social or biological Other?

There is a constant sense of boundaries dividing the persona/self from voices, images, forms. The Father-figure, both natural and literary, remains outside the self, despite the persona's frenetic attempts at internalisation. The patriarchal structures that the female writer fails to internalise only makes her more aware of her marginal position. Language itself is seen as alienating, indifferent to the actual crises that the self labours under. In order to achieve a free-wheeling control over language, the female self must necessarily "unlearn" the Law of the Father[s], re-examine the nature of the mother-bond and acquire a new, personal mode of articulation. This process, initiated in The Colossus with "Poem for a Birthday", culminates in the fluid space of articulation in Ariel.

The Colossus is, in a sense, a text about spaces - literary spaces, the space of memory and reconstruction, the open spaces of the natural world. Carving out personal niches, understanding the space of otherness and the nature of marginal positions:

---

20 The Poet Speaks, edited by Peter Orr, [Routledge & Kegan, London,1966.], p.169.

> Space, to the modern sensibility, was the place in which we might seek refuge from the ravaging effects of time and therefore became a way to survive meaningfully in time, to measure out places within an otherwise meaningless world of temporal flux.21

Much of The Colossus operates on this spatial dimension. Refuge is constantly sought in attempts to identify with the alien world of Nature, ["Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour", "Blue Moles"]; in trying to understand and redefine the concept of filial bonding ["The Colossus", "Full Fathom Five", "Lorelei", "The Disquieting Muses", "All the Dead Dears"]; in spatializing emotions through physical objects, architectural forms ["Sculptor", "The Colossus"]. In poems such as "Black Rook in Rainy Weather", refuge is sought in the permanence of the written word, through the random but powerful descent of the imagination. This is "subjective" space which privileges the "I", the perceiver who now shares the space of the literary object.22 In fact, it is this descent of the imagination which fosters fantasy, memory and reconstruction, thereby

---

21 Ruth Salvaggio, "Theory and Space, Space and Woman", Tulsa Studies in English, 7:2, 1988. p.263. Salvaggio outlines the diverse theories on the spatial dimension of literature. She points out how New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks and I.A.Richards crystallized the poetic object as the well wrought urn, the literary artefact or the verbal icon. Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, W.B.Yeats's treasures of Byzantium, fall in line with this strict fidelity to the spatial object.

22 Phenomenologists, like Georges Poulet, differentiated the physical object from the literary one - the former,"shut in by its contours, walled-up as in a fortress", the latter, "a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist." Instead of being objectified as "external space", these words and images are internalised by the human subject, by what Poulet terms, the "innermost self". - See Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading", New Literary History-1, [1969.], pp.53-68.

creating a space "that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces,--- [it is] the space we love."23 [e.g. "Poem for a Birthday"]. The search for a "space of love", a place of identification initiated in The Colossus and lyrically underscored in the later "motherhood" poems, will culminate in the powerful if ambivalent space of power in Ariel.

In The Colossus, writing is often seen as either a preservatory or therapeutic exercise, and the writer is seen as moulding general experience into particular truths. In the poem "Sculptor", the role of the artist is discussed at length. The poem pleads with the artist to remain an interpreter to a world which can appreciate his talent but cannot share his originality.

Our bodies flicker

Toward extinction in those eyes
Which, without him, were beggared
Of place, time, and their bodies.24

"Sculptor" exibits the paradox of the artist's position in the creative process. Until the work of art is created, the artist is indispensable. Yet once created, the work of art attains a state of permanence which outlasts the artist.

Emulous spirits make discord,

Try entry, enter nightmares
Until his chisel bequeaths
Them life livelier than ours,
A solider repose than death's.25

---

23 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, translated by Maria Jolas, [Orion Press, N.York, 1964.], p.xxxi.
24 "Sculptor", The Colossus, op.cit, p.70.
25 ibid.

Much like John Keats's famous Grecian Urn or Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, the bronze, wood and stone statues in "Sculptor" defy the passage of time through their strange life-in-death repose. The persona/speaker is seen as elsewhere, outside, viewing rather than participating in the creative process. Yet, there are attempts to view the sculptor as a mirror for the writer. Words, like icons, are given an existence of their own which outlives the moment of composition. The pieces of art that the speaker comments upon function nevertheless as reminders of the tremendous potentiality of the written word. The speaker, describing the sculptor at work, occupies the space of otherness, writing *about* rather than *through* experience. There is a definite insistence on the temporal order of signification - words as physical bodies, comforting as "palpable", "weighty" "bodies".

Luce Irigaray, while commenting on the technique of "mimesis" in women's writing, states that for women, the mimetic offers "a strategic and economic resource of subversion."26 It is a strategy which involves a thorough learning of patriarchally, codified structures of language and only subsequently, the reversal/dislocation of these structures. In The Colossus there is a rejection of an entire tradition of literary masters after many faithful attempts at imitating the voice and technique of literary Fathers.

---

26 Quoted in Luce Irigaray - Philosophy in the Feminine, op.cit, p.135.

In technique and image, voice and form, these male masters do not offer the female persona/speaker of the poems, a mode for mediating her experiences. Writing, in imitation of literary patriarchs, does not become a suitable "substitute" for the female self. In a language which alienates rather than represents, the female persona/self of The Colossus is unable to find herself. This inability to find a space of identification through writing is a certain kind of death.

> I walk dry on your kingdom's border
> Exiled to no good.27

In her journal entry, Plath had viewed the act of writing as a "way of ordering and re-ordering the chaos of experience."28 Failing to "re-order the chaos of experience" through literary affiliations to the Father, the self attempts to constitute itself through the acceptance of certain set codes within dominant discourse patterns. This involves the recognition and acceptance of the hierarchical nature of filial bonding. Both in terms of positioning the self within discourse and in terms of the tone and voice adopted, there is, subsequently, an inherent move to prioritise the Father-figure in a position of superiority. The female self, at first adopts a subservient role, deifying the "godhood" that the Father represents,29 rebuilding the colossal myth of the logic of phallic superiority.30

---

27 "Full Fathom Five", The Colossus, op.cit, p.39.
28 J., op.cit, p.280.
29 "Full Fathom Five", The Colossus, op.cit, p.39.
30 Although Lacan recognises that the M/Other plays an essential part in the construction of subjectivity, he privileges the phallus as the prime symbol and by

In order to situate herself within discourse, the female self must first seek representation within "the old myth of origins".31 In "Full Fathom Five", the Father-figure is mythologised as the venerable patriarch- invincible, dominating, implacable. The entire poem carries a sense of deference and awe as the female self realises that her marginal position is in direct proportion to the Father's omnipresence.

> --- white hair, white beard, far-flung,
> A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
> Crest and trough. Miles long
>
> Extend the radial sheaves
> Of your spread hair, in which wrinkling skeins
> Knotted, caught, survives
>
> The old myth of origins
> Unimaginable.32

A mythic sense of power is attributed to the figure of the inveterate patriarch, both in relation to space and time.

> For the archaic trenched lines
> Of your grained face shed time in runnels:
> Ages beat like rains
>
> On the unbeaten channels
> Of the ocean.33

---

extension, the Father, as the prime mover. [See Lacan's Ecrits , Tavistock, London,1977.] Also see his essay "The Phallic Phase and the Subjective Import of the Castration Complex", in Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, edited by Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, [Macmillan, London, 1982.], pp.106-109. As with literary antecedents, Plath allows for and subsequently breaks down the construction of this of the male stronghold of the Word

31 "Full Fathom Five", The Colossus, op.cit, p.38.
32 ibid.
33 ibid, p.39.

The use of fantasy in literature is often connected with the problematics of representation, "of making visible the unseen, of articulating the un-said."34

> Structured upon contradiction and ambivalence, the fantastic traces--- that which evades articulation--- By offering a problematic re-presentation of an empirically "real" world, the fantastic raises questions of the nature of the real and unreal, foregrounding the relation between them as its central concern.35

But fantastic imagising facilitates no actual point of identification for the female self in "Full Fathom Five". Exiled to "the border", the gross exaggerations only produce the effect of minimalising self-affirmation. "Channels", "tides", "waves", "crest", "foam", "trough", "sea", "ocean"- the poem offers a seascape of memory and fantasy. The colossal task of mythmaking is a means by which the unconscious seeks a space of refuge. Yet, implicit in the workings of the unconscious, is the acknowledgement of blindspots, of "crest" and "trough", of winding "labyrinthine tangle[s]".36 Accompanying the pleasure of fantasy is the inherent danger of exploding the engendered myth.

> --- All obscurity
> Starts with a danger:
>
> Your dangers are many. I
> Cannot look much but your form suffers
> Some strange injury
>
> And seems to die:37

The death of mythmaking is also the death of the self which builds the edifice. The use of fantasy as a

---

34 Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy - The Literature of Subversion, [Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1981.], p.48.
35 ibid, p.37.
36 "Full Fathom Five", The Colossus, op.cit, p.39.
37 ibid, p.38.

technique involves the dissolution of the structures of time and space. This tendency of removing structures is, in other words, a movement towards an ideal of undifferentiation. This desire for undifferentiation is close to the instinct that Freud terms "entropy" in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The persona's attempts to identify with the mythic Father in "Full Fathom Five" is an "entropic pull".38 The persona uses the element of fantasy in her contemplation of death as the only real means of rejoining her dead father; the only possibility of residing in a space free of all tension.

> Your shelled bed I remember.
> Father, this thick air is murderous.
> I would breathe water.39

The use of fantasy in the poem also emphasises however, the extent of patriarchal conditioning. Innermost feelings of inadequacy are muted within an allusive, mythic framework. The fantastic offers a narrative mode that is deliberately artificial, elaborate, consciously literary. In "Full Fathom Five", the self's lament at alienation is couched in a frame that alludes to English Literature's best-known patriarch- William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's The Tempest, plays with varying levels of fantasy in relation

---

38 See Sigmund Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle, translated from the second German edition by C.J.M.Hubback, [London, 1942.]. Freud sees the entropic pull as the most fundamental drive in Man: the desire towards a state of inorganicism/homeostasis. Crudely termed the death-wish, entropy is more than a simple desire to cease to be. It is in fact the most radical form of the pleasure principle- a longing for a space where all tensions are reduced.

39 "Full Fathom Five", The Colossus, op.cit, p.39.

to the controlling power of language and knowledge. Death in The Tempest becomes a relational concept with Prospero as the omnipotent patriarch defining and re-defining its contours. Ariel's song in the play, "full fathom five ---", informing Ferdinand of his father's death is counterpointed with the appearance of the "dead" father at the close of the play. In Plath's poem fantasy does not offer any such respite from fear. With the failure of mythmaking, the memory of the father acquires a sinister shadow. The invitation to rejoin the father-figure is a "murderous" one, implying dissolution and oblivion.

Fantasy as an apparatus, implies alienation and estrangement from natural origins. As Irene Bessière points out "fantastic narrative is perhaps the most artificial and deliberate mode of literary narrative---it is constructed upon the affirmation of emptiness---uncertainty arises from the mixture of "too much" with "nothing""40 Plath's "The Colossus" is a poem that uses this method of mixing "too much" with "nothing" in order to compensate for a sense of lack/absence.

"The Colossus" can function on a purely autobiographical level as a lament for the dead father by a daughter whose psychic recovery depends on the freeing of herself from the memory of her father's colossal image. Eileen Aird sees the poem as expressive of "the

---

40 Irene Bessière, Recit fantastique: la poetique de l'incertain, [Paris, 1974.], p.34. Quoted in Rosemary Jackson's Fantasy---, see op.cit, p.37.

father-daughter relationship.41 "Plath tries symbolically to reconstitute her father" say Murray Schwartz and Christopher Bollas.42 Suzanne Juhasz views the poem as an exploration of "very private, very personal experiences, her relationship with her dead father."43 The title, "The Colossus", recalls the name of the patriarchal figure "kolossus" who presided over Plath's Ouija board and was called upon to enunciate her father's spirit.44 The poem can however be viewed as a comment on the nature of female desire itself. In its desire to identify with the father-figure, the female self attempts to articulate/realize the nature of desire. The poem uses an archeological metaphor to define the relationship between fathers and daughters. The daughter voluntarily takes upon the task of refurbishing a broken statue, a fragmented memory, a dislocated identity. It is a lengthy labour of love, but one that is essentially endless.

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued, and properly jointed. ---
>
> Thirty years now I have laboured
> To dredge the silt from your throat.
> I am none the wiser.45

---

41 Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath: Her life and work, [Harper & Row, N.York, 1973.], p.29.
42 Murray Schwartz and Christopher Bollas, "The Absence of the Centre: Sylvia Plath and suicide", in Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, edited by Gary Lane, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1979.], p.185.
43 Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women - A New Tradition, [Harper and Row, N.York, 1976.], p.94.
44 Referred to in J., op.cit, p.244; in Letters Home, edited by Aurelia Plath, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1976.], p.346; and in Linda Wagner's Sylvia Plath: A Biography, [Simon And Schuster, N.York, 1987.], p.119.
45 "The Colossus", The Colossus, op.cit, p.12.

The statue, and by extension the father, is fantastically huge, imposing and implacable but also broken and grotesquely absurd. The daughter, in an almost priestess-like server image, struggles to re-present this shattered image.

> Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails
> of lysol
> I crawl like an ant in mourning
> Over the weedy acres of your brow
> To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
> The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.46

The persona reduced to an ant, seems to fade into insignificance during the act of reconstruction even as the statue/memory of the dead father assumes gigantic proportions. Yet, in order to acquire a sense of selfhood, the persona/I has to politicize the desire inherent in this filial bonding. The poem allegorizes both sexual and textual politics as it converges into a singular comment on female desire and patriarchal restraints on expressing such desire. Just as the statue remains broken, attempts at understanding tha patriarch's language is also of no avail.

> Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
> Proceed from your great lips.
> It's worse than a barnyard.47

And this from the "mouthpiece of the dead or of some god or other".48 The total irreverence of these lines add a tinge of mockery to the apparently devotional task of reconstruction. What the persona/self mocks at is the entire edifice of patriarchal literary tradition. The

---

46 ibid.
47 ibid.
48 ibid.

paternal language, rudely characterised as grunts and brays and cackles, is both incoherent and inadequate to the female writer. The poem emphasises "lips", "mouthpiece", "throat", "tongue", "ear" and "speech" pointing out a lack/absence of a medium for articulation and comprehension. The poem also reflects a distinct literary orientation in its piling up of allusions and suggestions. The act of reconstituting the father's image, and thereby the self, is couched in literary and historical allusions. Apollo, the god of poetry, who was represented as the Colossus of Rhodes; the intertextual associations with The Oresteia; the image of the oligarchies of Ancient Rome- these references are methods by which the poem illuminates what Lynda Bundtzen calls the "woman's psyche as it is shaped by patriarchal culture".49

> A blue sky out of the Oresteia
> Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
> You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.---
>
> My hours are married to shadow.50

Married to the shadow of the patriarch, the female self, much like Agnes Higgins in Plath's short story "The Wishing Box", is completely subordinate to the speech of the archetypal male.51 Notice that however incoherent this speech appears to be to the listening persona/self, it nonetheless represents language. The persona only

---

49 Lynda K.Bundtzen, Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the creative process, [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983.], p.186.
50 "The Colossus", op.cit, pp.12-13.
51 See Sylvia Plath, "The Wishing Box", in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1977 edition.], pp.48-55.

listens, watches, but is "none the wiser" at the end of the poem.

> Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
> Of your left ear, out of the wind,
>
> Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour.
> The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.52

The "colossus" representing patriarchal domination over language and culture is ideologised as the male totem of creative power. What then are the chances of a female writer acceding to this power? In a journal entry, [1958-'59], Plath had recorded a discussion that she had with her psychiatrist Ruth Beutscher on the interrelated nature of writing, fear and roots.

> What to do with fear of writing: why fear? Fear of not being a success? Fear of world casually saying we're wrong in rejections?
> Ideas of maleness: conservation of creative power [sex and writing].
> Why do I freeze in fear my mind and writing: say, look: no head, what can you expect of a girl with no head? ---
> *How to express anger creatively?*
> *Fear of losing male totem: what roots?*53 [italics my own.]

The persona in "The Colossus" has not yet learnt how to use anger constructively. In fact, the persona seems strangely resigned, not even listening for "the scrape of a keel", for some mode of escape from the linguistically barren, alien land of the patriarch. There is an odd sense of determinism in this reading of the poem which confines the female writer to the role of a mournful ephebe without the material and eventually the desire for independent creation. She is reduced to a restorer or copier of masculine traditions. "The Colossus" was

---

52 "The Colossus", op.cit, pp.12-13.
53 J., op.cit, p.272.

written after consciously attempting to relieve a writer's block by taking "a lesson from Ted" as her journal records.

> Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing. Menacing gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness. --- Take a lesson from Ted. He works and works. Rewrites, struggles, loses himself. I must work for independence. Make him proud. ---54
>
> I tried Ted's "exercise": deep-breathing, concentration on stream-of-conscious objects, these last days, and wrote two poems that pleased me.55

Note the ambivalence in Plath's tone as the search for an independent mode of expression is also one that is conditioned by the approval of the male literary world. It is this mood of ambivalence that pervades "The Colossus". While recording the apparent defeat and submission of the female writer to a paternal cultural code, the poem also celebrates the concept of female difference. This is seen in the scornful dismissal of the colossus's brutish speech, ["it is worse than a barnyard"]; in the portrayal of the decrepit culture of the fatherland, [the acres of "weedy" brow that must be scrubbed and reconstructed]. It is important to keep in mind that it is *she* who represents *him*, thus inverting the male-subject-active, female-object-passive constructs. As Juliet Mitchell points out, "the only thing that you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image."56

---

54 J., [Oct.13, 1959.], op.cit, pp.319-320.
55 J., [Oct.19, 1959.], op.cit, p.321.
56 See Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, [Penguin Books Ltd., England, N.York, 1974].

Steven Axelrod places the poem in the shadow of "prior canonical texts about monuments" ranging from W.B.Yeats's "The Statues", Ezra Pound's Malatesta Cantos, Hart Crane's "The Bridge", Wallace Stevens's "Owl's Clover" to Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"; "Christmas Eve under Hooker's Statue".57 In producing an alternative code to deference and submission, Plath's "The Colossus" swerves sharply from these literary forefathers. The use of fantasy allows the persona/self first to manifest and then expel the desire for identification with patriarchal definitions of culture. This process of expelling desire by narrating it/ by the "telling" of it foregrounds the ambivalent and contradictory nature of female desire itself. Un-said and un-seen, desire can be expressed by a female writer only as everything and nothing- "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible."58 If female desire is so spatialized, it becomes necessary to acknowledge boundaries and limits and a constant need to cross back and forth. This crossing is not to integrate oppositions but to maintain "the tension of contradiction, multiplicity and heterenomy."59

---

57 Sylvia Plath: The Wound and---, op.cit, p.49.
58 Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, [Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987.], p.26. Lauretis calls this the "space-off" position which helps women to re-vision rather than be viewed in the dominant discourse. Women can then enter discourse but still retain their marginal position.
59 ibid, pp.25-26.

In The Colossus, the female persona/self shares an ambivalent and rather contradictory relationship with the Mother-figures that appear in the volume. Dissatisfied with the inscrutable mysteries of Nature and with the imperious image of Daddy, the persona/self of The Colossus attempts to evaluate the nature of the mother-bond. Much has been made of Plath's obsession with Daddy, with the father as the source and the quest of the rage unleashed in the poems. Yet by the time we finish with Ariel, Daddy is eventually exorcised and his language is rejected as limited and limiting. The M[O]ther/s, however, remain as powerful mirrors which can be sheeted over but never quite cracked.60The ambivalence of the M[O]ther figures contribute to some of the most powerfully recurrent images in Plath's poetry- of death and nourishment, repelling "hag hands"61 and searching for "the mother's dug",62 "the "milk of love".63

Although, as we have seen, voices of literary forefathers abound through The Colossus, female presences intervene, pushing against paternalised spaces. Complicated, misaligned, passionate, the question of maternal genealogy becomes impossible to address without

---

60 Liz Yorke comments in Impertinent Voices, [see op.cit], that in poems like "Contusion" [cf. Ariel], the negation of identity is directly linked to a removal of the M[O]ther/s mirroring response. I prefer to view the poem as a portrayal of the risk that the female self takes in attempting to cathect the viewpoint of the M[O]ther/s in order to strike out alone. It is a bid that risks the dissolution of identity- a risk that possibly Plath understood and perhaps unwittingly took.
61 "All the Dead Dears", The Colossus, op.cit, p.20.
62 "I Want, I Want", ibid, p.28.
63 "Point Shirley", ibid, p.17.

a certain degree of aggression, idealization. The Colossus, which initiates the narrative of the female self, introduces disturbing images of the Mother figure in order to dislodge the colossal impact of patriarchal territorialization of the written/spoken Word. Emphasis is increasingly placed on a fragmented, polyvalent self risking the pleasure and danger of enunciation, "ordering and reordering the chaos of experience"64 through various subversive strategies. These strategies have been dealt with in greater detail in the later chapters.

The Colossus is full of disturbing images of the M/Other. "Traditionally" accepted notions of the Mother as a source of sustenance and love are distinctly missing in these early depictions. Desire for the Mother is couched in a fantasy of an order different from that employed in the depictions of the Father. The Mother is seen variously as the image of suffocation, death, barrenness, sickness, baldness. Emphasis is on thwarted desire and on the failure to nourish. As Mother Nature, it is the "cold-blooded mother" of the waning year that we see blamed in "Frog Autumn" for under-nourishing flora and fauna alike.

> The insects are scant, and skinny.
> In these palustral homes we only
> Croak and wither.

---

64 See J., op.cit, p.280. This constant "reordering" of chaotic experiences/memories is due to the fact that the Self is constantly in an ambiguous relationship with the M[O]ther. As Lacan points out "aggresivity is intimately linked to identification,--- where the subject's persecutors may turn out to be those with whom he had once identified himself: the other we fear is often the other we love. The moi is thus another, an alter ego." [The Language of the Self---, op.cit, p.161.].

Mornings dissipate in somnolence.
The sun brightens tardily
Among the pithless reeds. Flies fail us.
The fen sickens.65 [emphasis my own.]

Outer dissipation matches a mood of poetic sterility, a point so often raised in The Journals.66 In "Moonrise" it is the ghostly Moon-Mother Lucina who presides over a rotting scene of waste and death.

Lucina, bony mother, labouring
Among the socketed white stars, your face
Of candour pares white flesh to the white bone,

Who drag our ancient father at the heel,
White-bearded, weary. The berries purple
And bleed. The white stomach may ripen yet.67

The word "white" alone appears twenty one times in the ten stanzas of the poem! In each instance it is the stench of sickness and deterioration that is stressed upon rather than any "traditional" image of purity. The persona dressed in white, watches "grub-white mulberries redden among leaves"; sees the "white catalpa flowers" casting "white shadows in their dying"; views the pigeon "opening [and] shutting" its "white" fantail.

White petals, white fan-tails, ten white fingers.---

Berries redden. A body of whiteness
Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone
Though the body walk out in clean linen.

I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones
Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.
Death may whiten in the sun or out of it.

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.68

---

65 "Frog Autumn", The Colossus, op.cit, p.61.
66 The worst of Plath's sinuses coincide with rejections of her poems or feelings of dissapproval by her mother.
67 "Moonrise", The Colossus, op.cit, p.58.
68 ibid, p.57.

The image is of the Terrible Mother, the devouring Mother, the "dark continent" of patriarchal thought.69 The female figures in The Colossus are loaded with negative connotations. In "Point Shirley" nostalgia for the grandmother is associated with a failure to nourish and sustain.

> I would get from these dry-papped stones
> The milk of your love instilled in them.70

The sense of loss and grievance in this poem remains a hunger that is not assuaged. "I Want, I Want" records the same sense of dissatisfaction. The baby-god cries out in vain for-

> --- the mother's dug.
> The dry volcanoes cracked and spit,
>
> Sand abraded the milkless lip.71

In a journal entry in 1959, Plath conjoins the metaphor of nourishment, identity and enunciation.

> What do I expect or want from Mother? Hugging, mother's milk? But that is impossible to all of us now. Why should I want it still? What can I do with this want? How can I transfer it to something I can have?72

In another journal entry, Plath writes "I felt I couldn't write because she would appropriate it."73 What mother and daughter share is the vulnerability and the virulence of language. Words are both offerings [mirroring the "correct", codified "Sivvy" image in the

---

69 Freud refers to Woman as "the dark continent" in Medusa's Head. See The Standard edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, translated by James Strachey and Anna Freud, [Hogarth Press, London, 1953.]. Jacques Lacan sees Woman as the complete Other of Language - the un-seen and un-said of culture. See Ecrits: A Selection, op.cit.
70 "Point Shirley", The Colossus, op.cit, p.17.
71 "I Want, I Want", The Colossus, op.cit, p.28.
72 J., op.cit, p.285.
73 J., op.cit, p.280.

Letters Home], and tools of violence [the open attack against the suffocating expectations of the Mother in The Journals]. Beginning with The Colossus, the two strands merge into an insistent questioning of the mother-bond.

The desire for is both compelling and contradictory. There seems to be an inability in drawing up a definition of the self independent of the Mother. In Plath's later poems on her own mother and on her children, there is an attempt to create an identity for the self somewhere between the recognition and the refusal of the dependence on the M[O]ther.74 In The Colossus however, the negative images of the Mother predominate. "All the Dead Dears" evokes an entire generation of mothers.

> This lady here's no kin
> Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
> Blood and whistle my marrow clean
> To prove it. As I think now of her head, ---
>
> Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother
> Reach hag hands to haul me in, ---75

These "long gone darlings" are the companions of the self "be it at wakes, weddings,/ Childbirths or a family barbecue".76 It is a womb-tomb bonding which is in many ways far deeper than the relationship that the persona/self shares with the Father-figure/s.

Once again, fantasy as a technique is pressed into service in order to delineate the contours of desire and maternal geneaology. In "The Disquieting Muses", strange, fantastic shapes preside over the daughter's

---

74 This is dealt with in detail in Chapter 3, "And then the Body told Her Story."
75 "All the Dead Dears", The Colossus, op.cit, pp.19-20.
76 ibid, p.20.

psyche, left vacuous by the mother's ineffectual care. The Mother, in this poem, is seen as the measuring code of conduct, of correctness. This code is strangely in keeping with patriarchal cultural ideals of femininity. The mother's eagerness for her daughter to be "well-groomed" and accomplished starkly contrast the daughter's indifference to "arabesques" and "trills", "piano lessons", "the twinkle dress" and the "made to order stories".

> When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced, ---
> --- I could
> Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
> But, heavy-footed, stood aside
> In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
> Godmothers, and you cried and cried: ---
>
> Mother, you sent me to piano lessons ---
> Although each teacher found my touch
> Oddly wooden in spite of scales77

The daughter finds in her mother's made-to-order world only an absence and a lack. The mother, who faithfully represents a world order not different from patriarchal renditions of it, becomes for the female self a stifling, alienating presence. The Muses who represent the darker insights, the stony blackness of the unconscious, are never acknowledged by the mother. Instead the mother mouths words and conventions of etiquette to quell the upsurge of the unsaid, the fearful, the repressed.

> --- I wonder
> Whether you saw them, whether you said
> Words to rid me of those three ladies
> Nodding by night around my bed,
> Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.78

---

77 "The Disquieting Muses", The Colossus, op.cit, pp.50-51.
78 ibid, p.50.

It is from these grotesquely fearful presences that the self learns.

> I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
> From muses unhired by you, dear mother.79

It is an act of stealth, for the persona/self does not "betray" the company she keeps. But the acknowledgement of an "elsewhere" to Mother is not without accusation.

> And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
> Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
> Will betray the company I keep.80

The mother imagised as the "green balloon bright with a million/ Flowers and bluebirds", a "little planet" that bobs away, is both ephemeral and distant in her attempts at creating a self for her daughter. The daughter in fact affirms a sense of self through a deliberate suppression of her feelings of terror and anger. The act of writing itself has to compensate for the absent Mother. As Julia Kristeva points out-

> A representative of the good paternal function takes place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. Discourse is being substituted instead of maternal care.81

The collapse of maternal response and of paternal hierarchies is a possibility that the female self must be prepared to grapple with in order to come to terms with her own subjectivity. Female desire must then be thematised, re-constructed into words as best it can be, through a process of transgression. Figural representations of fear and domination by both the father

---

79 ibid, p.51.
80 ibid.
81 Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: an essay on Abjection, translated by Leon.S.Roudiez, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1982.], p.41.

and the mother must be "killed off" so that the self becomes parent to itself. In "Poem for a Birthday", which Plath considered her "breakthrough" poem, we witness the first aggressive rejection of the biological and culturally powerful parental constructs.

The poem can easily be read as an autobiographical piece narrating the trauma of electro convulsive therapy that Plath underwent after her first suicide attempt. "Volt upon volt", "food tubes" emphasises the process of physical and psychological recovery of the persona in "the city where men are mended."82

> Now they light me up like an electric bulb.
> For weeks I can remember nothing at all.83

Despite this leaning toward autobiographical details, the poem also outlines the deliberate attempt to overturn canons and to find an independent voice. Carefully structured in the Roethkean mould,84 the persona/self simultaneously exorcises the literary father and the biological one. The Roethkean technique of minimalism is adopted by the persona in order to escape notice; in order to fit in imperceptibly into the patriarchal framework.

> Let me sit in a flowerpot,
> The spiders won't notice.

---

82 "Stones", "Poem for a Birthday", The Colossus, op.cit, p.77.
83 "Who", ibid, p.72.
84 Plath pays careful attention to Roethke's technique of minimalism and of combining the insect and vegetable world to comment upon and to imagise disturbed states of mind. The Roethkean technique of dividing the poem into different sections connected by dominant themes and images is also adopted in Plath's poem. [see Roethke's Greenhouse poems in particular.]

My heart is a stopped geranium.85

In true Roethkean fashion, identification is sought in vegetation, in inanimate objects, in insects, in animals.

I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,
Without dreams of any sort. --- ["Who"- p.72.]

I am round as an owl,
I see by my own light.
Any day I may litter puppies
Or mother a horse. ---

Moley-handed, I eat my way. --- ["Dark House"- p.73.]

If I am a little one, I can do no harm.
If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over. So I said,
Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.
["Witch Burning"- p.77.]

These images were comfortable when the persona/self was "ordinary", willingly accepting her role in patriarchal society.

Once I was ordinary:
Sat by my father's bean tree
Eating the fingers of wisdom.86

The persona/self is within the codified structures of the patriarch's language. "Maenad" in "Poem for a Birthday", uses the word "barnyard", immediately linking up associations of language and identity that the same word helped evoke in "The Colossus". Only this time, the self's ambivalent relationship with the mother seems to precipitate either dissolution or, importantly enough, difference.

Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
I am becoming another.87

---

85 "Who", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, p.71.
86 "Maenad", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, p.73.
87 ibid, p.74.

This aggressive rejection of the mother follows closely on the heels of the frantic though nullified attempt by the self to articulate/ re-present the desire for the M[O]ther.

> Mother, you are the one mouth
> I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness
> Eat me.88

These lines powerfully combine the twin concepts of nourishment and articulation where lack of the former results in the failure of the latter. "Poem for a Birthday" is in fact strewn with references to metaphors relating to orality. The "mouth" and the "tongue", "licking", "eating", "swallowing", "devouring", "drinking"- these are crucial images in the poem. These images are later developed to a carnivalesque foregrounding of the female body in order to effectively disrupt and subvert patriarchal language structures.89 From attempts at minimalism, the self now has to become "another".

> It is warm and tolerable
> In the bowel of the root.
> Here's a cuddly mother.90

From these images in "Dark House" that align the movements of the nocturnal moles with the pre-natal stirrings of a child, the self searches for an identity, a name.

---

88 "Who", op.cit, p.72.
89 The foregrounding of the female body as the space of articulation is detailed in Chapter 3, "And then the Body told Her Story". The carnivalesque use of language is discussed in Chapter 2, "Crossing the Rubicon" and in Chapter 6, " Re-covery and Release in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems, or *Ariel* as it should have been."
90 "Dark House", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, p.73.

Lady, who are these others in the moon's vat -
Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds?
In this light the blood is black.
Tell me my name.91

It is a search for a space of one's own, a break from the earlier dependence on memory and nostalgia

The mother of mouths didn't love me.
The old man shrank to a doll.
O I am too big to go backward:92

"Hogwallow's at the window", "Hairtusk's bride", "Golgotha", the male literary tradition, patriarchal hierarchies and maternal allegiances are all subsumed in the ecstatic and painful ritual of becoming.

It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth.

Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand:
I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.
Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days
I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.
My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.
I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.93

What this birthday celebrates is the recovery and release of the self into a space of power away from the Mother's clutch and the Father's dominating shadow. Unlike Roethke, Plath does not choose to end her poem either upon the moment of revelation [as in "Witch Burning"] or upon any sense of pantheistic delight. "Stones", the final section of "Poem for a Birthday", projects the image of the self reconstructed by Others- in this instance, a team of cheerful if impersonal doctors. From attempting to glue together the edifice of

91 "Maenad", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, p.74.
92 ibid.
93 "Witch Burning", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, p.77.

the patriarch in "The Colossus", the self is now "mended", "reconstructed". Mention is still made of the dissatisfaction with filial bonding, ["the stomach of indifference", "the wordless cupboard" which hearkens back to an earlier line - "married to a cupboard of rubbish"]. The self, a "pestle" at the start of the poem, is now being mended stone by stone. If read as a continuation of "Witch Burning", "Stones" becomes the first real if tentative step in the laborious task of self-definition.

> This is the city where men are mended.
> I lie on a great anvil.
> The flat blue sky-circle
> Flew off like the hat of a doll
> When I fell out of the light. I entered
> The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.
>
> The mother of pestles diminished me.
> I became a still pebble. ---
>
> The mouth-hole crying their locations.
> Drunk as a foetus
> I suck at the paps of darkness.94

The narrative of self-definition is one of tormenting choices for the self who is at the vortex. The fantastic image of burning, flying, ascending, is rejected in favour of a dialectic, ambiguous relationship with the Other. The polyvalent nature of the female self, the contradictory nature of female desire cannot ultimately deny the role of the social, literary, biological Other in shaping its ambivalences. This is the excitement and inherent danger of female desire.

> Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.
>
> Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.

---

94 "Stones", "Poem for a Birthday", op.cit, pp.77-78.

The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.95

In the analysis to follow, we will see how these first tentative steps at self-definition will be consolidated into an idiolect, a specific "female" register, but one which recognizes and holds in fine balance, the ambivalence of relationships. Through linguistic reversals, transformations and transgressions, the female self will become "mother" to herself. It is the interrogation of authority that has begun in The Colossus, with the element of fantasy aiding "not in the positive *embodiment* of truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation and, most importantly, its *testing*."96

95 ibid, p.79.
96 M.M.Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, translated by R.W.Rostel, [Ardis, 1973.], p.94.

CROSSING THE RUBICON

--- can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact
intrudes even when the revolted eye
is closed: ---

each day demands we create our whole world over.
disguising the constant horror in a coat
of many-coloured fictions:1

In the previous chapter on The Colossus, a distinct move to create a self-narrative independent of the social, literary and biological Other was observed. Affiliations to the dominating Father figure[s] and to the stifling, demanding Mother[s] were rejected as deadening influences, limiting the process of self definition. Yet as "Poem for a Birthday" clearly indicates, biological bonds and literary forefathers cannot be so summarily dismissed. How then does the female self authenticate a space of her own? Plath's second volume Crossing the Water, foregrounds the concept of female space through textual travesties like parody, masquerade, posing, teasing. There is a concerted effort to employ rhythmic reversals of certain accepted hierarchies within language in order to initiate a mood of defiance and transgression.

If we term female space as subversive, linguistic rather than generic, it is imperative to question the acceptance of the patriarchal element in discourse as the

---

1 Sylvia Plath, "Tale of a Tub", in the Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1981.], p.25.

functional parameter whose Law governs language structures.2 Plath's Crossing the Water draws its strength from using linguistic reversals as a mode of release for the female self from the ignominy of marginality.3 As in The Colossus, the revolt against the patriarch is preceded by an increasing sense of tension and alienation. Like The Colossus, a sense of unease, of living and moving in a strangely impersonal universe pervades many of Plath's poems in Crossing the Water.

"Blackberrying" is case in point. A sense of malaise is projected through the separateness of the speaker and through the grotesque enlargement of details. The opening line recalls the famous lines in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot - "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."4 Beckett often uses the technique of overloading and repeating the linguistic

---

2 Jacques Lacan's theory of language purports that language is primarily symbolic with the phallic signifier and the Law of the Father playing crucial roles in sustaining and generating this structure. If women exist in language only as constructs of male desire, where and what are women? The question therefore is whether within such a structure, women are permanently relegated to the margins, the peripherals of discourse.
I refer to the concept of "le nom du pere" that was explained in detail in footnote no:2, in Chapter 1, ""Becoming Another" - Writing and Identity".

3 In About Chinese Women, Julia Kristeva questions the relationship of the female writer to the maternal. Kristeva points out that female specificity, in a society that is largely patrilineal, is often misunderstood or maligned. As Kristeva states, any attempt to be part of the symbolic order except by identification with the Father results in the woman being dubbed as " a specialist in the unconscious, a witch, a bacchanalian, taking her jouissance into an anti-Apollonian, Dionysian orgy." See Julia Kristeva, About Chinese Women, translated by Anita Barrows, [Marion Boyars Publication Ltd., London, 1977.], p.35.

4 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1959.], p.41.

sign with deliberate negative connotations so as to emphasise the utter loneliness of the speaking voice.5 This ties in with the general mood of desolation in "Blackberrying" - "Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries."6 Apart from the sense of isolation and anguish, this line also ushers in a sense of menace. The blackberry field with its images of ripeness and plenty, might not seem, at first, similar to the no-man's land of Vladimir and Estragon7, or to the easily penetrable and hence unsafe lodgings of Stanley.8 Yet, the blackberry field is as claustrophobic a space as that projected in the Absurd plays9 aforementioned suffocating and inactivating the central character in like manner. The female persona of "Blackberrying" seems

---

5 Beckett's plays often use silence, repetition and intense lyricism in powerful juxtaposition. This has the uncanny effect of placing the subject within a space "outside" what we normally term "speech". Apart from isolating the subject, this technique also reveals how communication becomes an act of reclamation from the constant rhythms of silence that exist between words. See especially, Waiting for Godot, op.cit.

6 Sylvia Plath, "Blackberrying", in Crossing the Water, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1971.], p.24.

7 The reference is to the two central characters in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. [see op.cit.]

8 Stanley is the chief character in Harold Pinter's drama of of menace, The Birthday Party, [Eyre Methuen Ltd., London, 1960.].

9 The term "Absurd" was applied collectively to group playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet, all of whom conveyed, in their plays, a sense of metaphysical anguish and an evident dislocation at the root of being. Their plays displayed a strange circularity of vision where characters are forced to live and move in an unyielding, mechanistic and often cruelly impersonal universe. Absurd Drama relentlessly focuses on the futile attempts at communication, on black humour and on the growing isolation of the human condition. For a detailed analysis see Martin Esslin's The Theatre of the Absurd, [Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962.]; Revised and enlarged edition, [Harmondsworth, 1968.].

to be continuously threatened by the collapse of referential language. The speaker is easily able to describe the physical details of the locale - the "blackberry alley", "the black, cacophonous flocks" of choughs, "the honey-feast of berries", "the two hills" and "a sudden wind", "the great space of the sea". Yet when she tries to articulate her sense of fear, the linguistic sign suddenly becomes a barrier that defeats her attempts at signification. There is an increasing recourse to repetition to "din" out meaning from words in much the same manner as the waves that are depicted in the poem as uselessly trying to reclaim the land that lies beyond.

> --- nothing, nothing but a great space
> Of white and pewter lights, and a din like
> silversmiths
> Beating and beating at an intractable metal.10

Fear in Absurd Drama is signalled through repetition as language structures crumble, failing to adequately represent the emotional turmoil of the speaker.11 The female persona in "Blackberrying" is trapped in an unyielding physical order and in an insular linguistic sign. The repeated references to "blackberries", "berries", "bush of berries", "honey-feast of berries", add up to a sense of cloying surfeit. The repetitions

---

10 "Blackberrying", op.cit, p.25.

11 Notice this excerpt from Eugene Ionesco's Rhinoceros, where fear of the unknown plummets the characters into a vacuous sort of speech:

Proprietor [to the Grocer's wife]: Your husband's right, the Asiatic rhinoceros has two horns and the African must have two and vice versa.---

Proprietor [to the Grocer's wife]: If the one has two horns the other must have one.

Old Gentleman: Perhaps its the other with two and the one with one. [see Rhinoceros, from Plays - Vol:iv, [John Calder [Publishers] Ltd., London, 1960.].

only serve to increase the sense of menace as the female persona seems trapped in an alien and impersonal universe. The female persona is caged in by rows of blackberries, and the tall hills, ill-treated by the wind and fazed at the end of her journey by the sight of the sea.

> From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,
> Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.
> These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted
> salt.
> I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook
> brings me
> To the hills' northern face, ---
> That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
> Of white and pewter lights.12

The use of repetition as Luce Irigaray points out, is closely aligned to the concept of "mimesis", a concept that plays a crucial role in defining a narrative for the female self.

> To play with mimeseis is --- for a woman to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means 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. 13

Notice however, that in "Blackberrying", the mood of active protest is conspicuously absent. Only the choughs seem to protest. The use of the technique of mimesis is seen in its full effect only in Ariel, especially in the poem "Daddy". The female persona in "Blackberrying" is curiously passive, stained rather than released by her contact with the external world.

---

12 "Blackberrying", op.cit, pp. 24-25.
13 Luce Irigaray, The Sex which is not One, translated by Catherine Porter, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.York, 1985.], p.76.

--- Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on
my fingers.
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they
must love
me.14

The description of the blackberry field and the surrounding hills is one of studied exaggeration, calculated to reduce the image of the central persona to one of vulnerable littleness. The entire scene represents rotting and festering rather than burgeoning with life - the flies drugged by the "honey-feast of the berries", the cluster of berries themselves, huge, grotesque, harmful "hooks", the hills "too green and sweet". This feeling of malaise does authenticate the female persona's quest for release. The journey motif employed in the poem describes a long-winding journey from and to menacing spaces of similar intensity. The sea which greets the persona at the end of her journey, is seen as a threatening, formless presence. The female persona does not find with the sea the "sisterhood" that she so unwillingly found with the berries. The very formlessness of the sea, which defies symbolic representation, only threatens the female persona with its menacing nothingness.

Apart from this sense of unease, generated by an alien and threatening external universe, many poems in Crossing the Water concentrate on a distinct spatial dimension within the text in relation to the female self. A sub-textual narrative of self definition is created through

14 "Blackberrying", op.cit, p.24.

the deliberate assertion of the power of the female body in restructuring the dominant patriarchal patterns of language. In Plath's later poems, chiefly in Winter Trees and Ariel, relating specifically to pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, the female self occupies the specialised space of the Mother and functions as the complete Other to masculine discourse.15 In Crossing the Water the female body is viewed as the site of linguistic insurgency. The focus is on the grotesque 16 female body and on aberrant social behavioural patterns in order to

---

15 This position, authenicated by the experience of motherhood and the lanuage generated therein, is analysed in the next chapter, i.e. chapter 3, "And then the Body told Her Story".

16 Bakhtin analyses Rabelais as a "carnivalesque" text, i.e. one that constantly displays a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge and pleasure. The masks of the carnival, exaggerate and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark high culture and organized society. Central to Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais as a carnivalesque text is his concept of "grotesque realism" with particular emphasis on the grotesque body. "The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence." - M.M.Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, translated by Helene Iswolsky, [The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1968.], p.24. The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming. It is "the ever unfinished, ever creating body." - [ibid, p.26.] This image is diametrically opposed to the monumental, static, classical image of the finished, completed body. - [ibid, p.25.].

Importantly, the grotesque concept of the body finds parallel expression in language as the "basis of abuses, oaths and curses." - [ibid, p.27.].

Also important for discussions on language and the concept of the carnival are The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, edited by Michael Holquist, [University of Texas Press, Austin,1981.] and The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, [Theory and History of Literature: Vol:8, Manchester University Press, 1984.].

dislodge the dominant patriarchal hierarchies in language.

In the "Zoo Keeper's Wife", the female persona is depicted as strangely drugged into awareness. The poem is in fact closely aligned to another poem in the volume, "Insomniac", with its delineation of the persona in a state of wide-eyed desperation. In the "Zoo Keeper's Wife" the persona is both sleepless and distraught.

> I can stay awake all night, if need be -
> Cold as an eel, without eyelids. ---
>
> Old grievances jostling each other, so many
> loose teeth. ---
> Some things of this world are indigestible.17

"Zoo Keeper's Wife" however, operates on a far more surrealistic level than "Insomniac", with grotesque animal imagery highlighting the persona's sense of metaphysical anguish. "Insomniac" carries a sense of nostalgia for the "mizzling days/ Of childhood and adolescence, sticky with dreams,/ Parental faces on tall stalks, alternately stern and tearful,".18 This nostalgic strain is replaced in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" by harsh distortions, bringing in a tone of bitter disillusionment. In the poem it is the death of a love relationship that causes the disease of insomnia. The "old grievances" just will not let the persona rest. The inertness of the male persona in "Insomniac", incapable of even storing or arranging memories finds a vivid contrast in the terrible gaping stare of the Zoo Keeper's wife, as she confronts the lack at the root of her being.

---

17 "Zoo Keeper's Wife", Crossing the Water, op.cit, p.58.
18 "Insomniac", ibid, p.21.

His head is a little interior of grey mirrors.
Each gesture flees immediately down an alley
Of diminishing perspectives, and its significance
Drains like water out the hole at the far end.19

Like a dead lake the dark envelops me,
Blueblack, a spectacular plum fruit.
No airbubbles start from my heart, I am lungless
And ugly, my belly a silk stocking
Where the heads and tails of my sisters decompose.20

In "Zoo Keeper's Wife" the female persona adopts a hard-hitting language in order to debase the dominant male strata. The female speaker employs a language that mimes the brutality and raw strength of the animal kingdom. Conventional notions of love are parodied in a tone of bitter mockery. The concept of love loses every shred of romance and becomes instead a euphemism for lust. Courtship is thus best read as mateship in the dense, claustrophobic, cage-like atmosphere of the poem.

You wooed me with the wolf-headed fruit bats
Hanging from their scorched hooks in the moist
Fug of the Small Mammal House.
The armadillo dozed in his sandbin
Obscene and bald as a pig, the white mice
Multiplied to infinity like angels on a pinhead
Out of sheer boredom. Tangled in the sweat-wet
sheets
I remember the bloodied chicks and the quartered
rabbits. ---

I can't get it out of my mind

How our courtship lit the tindery cages.21

Notice that the emphasis is on the severed, "the quartered", the mutilated body. Both the human and the animal body acquire grossly exaggerated, nightmarish proportions. The female speaker may be "lungless" but she definitely is not voiceless. Indeed the title,

19 ibid.
20 "Zoo Keeper's Wife", op.cit, p.58.
21 ibid, pp.58-59.

evocative of a later poem in Ariel, "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter", carries similar associations of the female persona's involvement in a relationship that is unequal, but more importantly, incestuous. The lover/husband is as much the keeper, the master, of the animals in their cages as he is the owner of the female persona. Yet it is this superior male that is demeaned, described in a metonymic fashion as "fat pork", the "marrowy sweetheart". The reference to flesh and blood will later become core images in Ariel where in times of extreme anguish, the female body will be represented through the concept of "le corps morcele" - the body in bits and pieces.

Another link to Ariel is the peculiar way in which the comic and ironic levels operate. Mary Lynn Broe comments that skilfully developed irony is a characteristic of many of the poems of Crossing the Water.22 Broe comments that this use of irony heightens the sense of "the poet dramatically coming to terms with a new protean self image".23 In "Zoo Keeper's Wife" Plath juxtaposes exact or exaggerated detail with a strong undercurrent of mocking laughter. Notice the delightful sense of balance in the exactitude and the comic incongruity of comparisons -

> Your two-horned rhinoceros opened a mouth
> Dirty as a bootsole and big as a hospital sink
> For my cube of sugar: its bog breath

---

22 Mary Lynn Broe, "Demythologizing Sivvy: that "theatrical comeback in broad daylight" ", Poet and Critic: 10:1, [1977.], p.36.
23 ibid.

Gloved my arm to the elbow.24

Notice also the alignment of the comic with the grotesque-

> I entered your bible, I boarded your ark
> With the sacred baboon in his wig and wax ears
> And the bear-furred, bird-eating spider
> Clambering round its glass box like an eight-fingered hand.25

Underlying these forays into the comic is the subtextual anguished recognition that the distorted, overblown, creeping and crawling creatures are manifestations of the female persona's own sickened mind. This is the black humour of the Theatre of the Absurd where one laughs in the face of contraries, not to accept and assimilate them but to confirm ambivalence and the immense craving at the root of being. By the time Plath wrote the terrible lyrics of 1962, collected in Ariel, this sense of underlying laughter is developed into a strange new mode of serious comedy, with the female persona in total control of the contradictions and the plaguing ambivalence of relationships.

Crossing the Water has often been referred to as a volume of transitional verse.26 The volume does indeed

---

24 "Zoo Keeper's Wife", op.cit, p.59.
25 ibid.
26 The volume, Crossing the Water, first published in 1971 by Faber and Faber Ltd., was sub-titled "Transitional Poems". Marjorie Perloff in an essay "On the Road to Ariel: The "Transitional" Poetry of Sylvia Plath" analyses the transitional status of these poems, "written in the period between the publication of The Colossus [1960] and the posthumous book Ariel [published in England in 1965.]." See this article by Perloff in Sylvia Plath - The Woman and the Work, edited with introduction by Edward Butscher, [Peter Owen, London, 1979.], p.126.
Perloff also quotes Hughes, who in a B.B.C. broadcast, called the poems in Crossing the Water "work from the

record a crucial phase of transition and development in Plath's career as a poet. Crossing the Water represents the threshold between the mood of deference to patriarchal models so evident in the poems of The Colossus and the mood of defiance in overthrowing those very models in the poems of Ariel. Taking a cue from the predominant mood in The Colossus, the search for a space of one's own to adequately define and defend female desire is continued in Crossing the Water. The female self, in her search for a narrative of her own projects an image of insular splendour by setting itself an alter image which is attacked, demeaned and continually used to the advantage of the narcissistic "I". This use of bi-polarities to arrive at a definition of the self will assume great significance in the poems of Ariel.27

In Crossing the Water, this dualistic framework is distinctly used in poems such as "In Plaster", with deliberate foregrounding of oppositional states of being - sickness and health, purity and impurity, appearance and reality. Importantly enough, in "In Plaster", the dualisms astriding the linguistic sign are linked to the female body. Like the poem "Face-Lift", "In Plaster" also depicts a hospital scene. Unlike "Face Lift" however, the female persona in "In Plaster"depicts no

---

interim" that was "fascinating and --- beautiful in a rich and easy way that we find neither in The Colossus or Ariel." - [ibid].

27 This is discussed in Chapter 4, "The "Other" side of Writing", where in certain poems in Ariel, demeaning references to the Other, especially to the rival woman, are used to justify the female self's sense of superiority.

sign of slipping in and out of consciousness. Instead, the central persona, now tightly plastered rather than lightly gauzed as in "Face-Lift", is engaged in a vociferous dramatic monologue. The reader co-habits the hospital room as the implied listener, an essential requirement of the dramatic monologue as a genre. What the audience witnesses is the battle between the "plaster saint" - the outer, the apparent but nonetheless the artificial self, - and "the old yellow" self - the hidden, repressed but nevertheless the true self. The female speaker seeks to set up bodily oppositions between the manifest and repressed selves, with the former at first representing a superior order.

> --- There are two of me now:
> This absolutely new white person and the old yellow one,
> And the white person is certainly the superior one.
> She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints. ---
> And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was
>
> Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.28

Yet the apparent "absolutely white person" is cold, immovable and curiously lifeless when separated from the vibrant, hidden "old yellow one".

> Without me, she wouldn't exist, ---
> I gave her soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
> Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,29

It is a relationship of interdependence, for the "old yellow one" in its turn, cannot exist, leave alone

---

28 "In Plaster", Crossing the Water, op.cit, p.30.
29 ibid.

surface without the continuing presence of the plaster saint.

> I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
> She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp -
> I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
> So I was careful not to upset her in anyway
> Or brag ahead of time how I'd avenge myself.30

This mutual interdependence is a kind of deathly marriage.

> "Living with her was like living with my own
> coffin:" 31

The "vase reconstructed", the "elusive rose", mentioned in "Poem for a Birthday" at the close of The Colossus, is here dramatically divested of the positive connotations of regeneration that it carries in that poem. The rose, conventionally an image of love, but also frailty, is here equated with the grotesque, "ugly hairy", "old yellow" self, collecting its strength to break out of the vase that traps it. The vase itself, equated to the apparently "white and unbreakable" self, is, we are reminded, made of brittle, "not very valuable porcelain". Notice therefore that the ambivalences in the relationship cannot be easily resolved, as troubling bi-polarities disallow any simplistic equations. Thus the "ugly" and the "hairy" self is also beautiful while the "pacifist", "tidy", "white" self is also condescending and cunning. Traditional concepts of perfection are forcibly collapsed in what increasingly becomes a battle for survival.

> Now I see it must be one or the other of us.

---

30 ibid, p.31.
31 ibid.

She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter
a bit.
I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage
without
her,
And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to
miss me.32

The female speaker's belief that she can completely silence the internal "other", the alter-image, is an illogical claim. "In Plaster" displays how the female persona's closest approximation to effective communication is only through an acceptance of duality. The speaker in "In Plaster" has not yet attained the self-suffiency so evident in the poems of 1962 such as "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", Purdah" and the Bee poems. In "In Plaster", the speaker, when confronted with contradictions is only "collecting [her] strength", in preparation for combat. The female self has still not quite reached the position of of the persona of Ariel, whose confidence matches her control over contraries.

Apart from signalling the early use of bi-polarities to achieve self-definition, certain poems in Crossing the Water highlight the manner in which the carnival element33 is introduced into discourse in order to enable the female self to redeploy meaning. As with the use of bi-polarities, the introduction of the carnival in

---

32 ibid. p.32.
33 I refer chiefly to the concept of the carnival as popularised by Mikhail Bakhtin. See viz. Rabelais and his World, op. cit, and The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, op.cit. The carnivalesque disregard of conventions, the deliberate reversal of hierarchies and the significance of the grotesque find an uncanny alignment with certain poems in the Plath canon.

discourse becomes an important element in Plath's later poetry.34

In Crossing the Water, poems such as "The Tour" and "Last Words" depict the manner in which the linguistic sign is carnivalised in order to overthrow the established hierarchies of patriarchal discourse. In both poems the sign simutaneously describes and undercuts a world of conventions. While "The Tour" speaks of the death of communication by emphasising the dearth of adequate linguistic resources for the speaker, "Last Words" underpins and subverts the traditional concept of death.

In "The Tour", the female persona is seen taking a visitor, her "maiden aunt" around her house. The flippancy and easy conversational tone employed in the poem belies the persona's actual indignation at the breach of privacy. There is good measure of viciousness in the attack against the conventional etiquette which the aunt represents. The traditional courteous ethic of "calling on" loved ones is rudely mocked and revealed to be a mere disguise covering the vapidity of the relationship between the "caller" and the "called". Notice the acidic tone operating behind the female speaker's apparent delight at having guests -

> O maiden aunt, you have come to call.
> Do step into the hall!
> With your bold
> Gecko, the little flick!
> All cogs, weird sparkle and every cog solid gold.

---

34 The use of the carnival element in discourse assumes crucial importance in the Plath's Bee poems. This is analysed in detail in the final chapter, i.e. chapter 6.

And I in slippers and housedress with no lipstick!

And you want to be shown about.35

Throughout the poem, the aunt's apparently higher social status, the conventionality of her stance and her concern for her niece is caricatured. There is a continuous process of demolition at work. The aunt with her "weird sparkle of gold", her "Javanese geese and the monkey trees", belongs to another world - the world of officialdom - very different from the speaker's world which is "a bit of a wild machine, a bit of a mess!"36 The aunt officiously inspects not just the premises but the speaker herself. The flippancy of the tone of the poem is therefore a defensive and defiant move. The female speaker uses the comic idiom in a rather casual manner only to veil the in-rush of troubled memories.

--- And this
Is where I kept the furnace, ---
It simply exploded one night,
It went up in smoke.
And that's why I have no hair, auntie, that's why I choke

Off and on, as if I just had to retch.37

There is really no point of communion, leave alone communication. This is the tragic gap in communication that Harold Pinter spoke of-

Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that, there is a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship.38

---

35 "The Tour", Crossing the Water, op.cit, p.61.
36 ibid.
37 ibid.
38 Harold Pinter in an interview with Kenneth Tynan, B.B.C. Home Service, 28 October, 1960.

This is poetry evincing a return to the brutality of language stripped of euphemisms, made agonisingly direct and clipped. Plath brilliantly reverses the entire social structure portrayed in the poem by altering the positions that the "caller" and "called" occupied. The aunt who visits, adopts a patronising position, her concern masking a vulgar sort of curiosity. Yet it is the niece, curious about the actual motif of the aunt's visit who adopts a condescending tone of dismissal. The aunt is dislodged from her superior position of "caller" by deft methods of textual travesty. There is teasing and mockery, as a deliberately impertinent tone is adopted to highlight the incongruity at the root of this visit -

> I am bitter? I'm averse?
> Here's your specs, dear, here's your purse.
>
> Toddle on home to tea now in your flat hat.
> It'll be *lemon* tea for me,
> Lemon tea and earwig biscuits - creepy-creepy.
> You'd not want that.
> Toddle on home, before the weather's worse.
> Toddle on home, and don't trip on the nurse!-39

Through the use of a reductive, off-beat kind of rhyme scheme, a tone of parody is introduced-

> She may be bald, she may have no eyes,
> But Auntie, she's awfully nice.
> She's pink, she's a born midwife -
> She can bring the dead to life
> With her wiggly fingers and for a very small fee.
> Well I *hope* you've enjoyed it, auntie!40

The official courteous address along with the use of the diminutive does not show any adherence to social etiquette but rather brings about a definite reversal.

---

39 "The Tour", op.cit,. p.62.
40 ibid.

The speaker's repeated use of the phrase "toddle on home" is as dismissive as the repetitive use of the word "auntie".

In "The Tour", we see the first use in Plath's poetry of a vicious, hard-hitting tone to debase social conventions and overturn dominant hierarchies in language. The sense of mocking laughter is unmistakable in this poem. Marleen Barr, referring to ideological reversals and role reversals, states that often, a form of "serious laughter is evoked by these reversals, which cannot be correctly defined as either patriarchal law or a simplistic parody of patriarchal law. Instead the reversal becomes something other, a new law which is other from patriarchal law."41 By replacing conventional codes with strange new ones, this new, "something other" that Barr speaks about becomes, for the female self, a powerful space of articulation. This position of power is seen in the poems of Ariel wherein the freedom and relativity of the carnival aspect of the language allows the female self to make the vital crossover from the rigid insularity of masculine discourse to a fluid space, effectively mirroring her own uniqueness.42

---

41 Marleen Barr, "Laughing in liberating defiance", in Discontented Discourses, edited by Marleen Barr and Richard Feldstein, [University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989.], p.89.

42 The movement towards "something other" than patriarchal law is analysed in the next chapter, i.e. Chapter 3, "And then the Body told Her Story", dealing with Plath's poems relating specifically to pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. The consolidation of a space of power is dealt with in Chapter 5 "Quenching the Phoenix Fires" and in Chapter 6 "The Quest for the Third Space - Re-covery and Release in Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems", dealing with specific poems from Ariel.

Turning to "Last Words" we notice that the female persona adorns the mask of a performer in order to enact the ceremony of death. "Last Words", purportedly revealing the last wishes of the female persona, reads as a marvellous last act before the curtain call. The speaker does not react to the impending finality of Death with any conventional sense of fear. She is not cowering before this inexplicable phenomenon but is rather undauntedly preparing to make a memorable and spectacular exit. Her coffin will be a bizarre, absurd mockery of the conventional sobriety attached to funerals -

> I do not want a plain box, I want a sarcophagus
> With tigery stripes, and a face on it
> Round as the moon, to stare up.43

Notice how this poem prepares the ground for the mood of "Lady Lazarus" -

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.44

We have not yet reached the market-place performance of "Lady Lazarus", with the "pea-nut crunching crowd" witnessing the miraculous recovery of the self on display.45 As Bakhtin pointed out the mask is an important aspect of the carnival in that it is "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation,with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity: --- is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries."46 The female

---

43 "Last Words", Crossing the Water, op.cit, p.63.
44 "Lady Lazarus", Ariel, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1965.], p.17.
45 See "Lady Lazarus", op.cit.
46 Rabelais and his World, op.cit, p.40.

speaker in "Last Words" unlike the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" is not yet able to assimilate the elements of the mask, the elements of the spectacle, in order to acclaim a Phoenix-like ascent into a specific space of power. Unlike the speaker in "Lady Lazarus", the speaker in "Last Words" is unwilling to leave behind the world of domesticity.

> I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam
> In dreams, through mouth-hole or eye-hole. I can't
> stop it.
> One day it won't come back. Things aren't like that.
> They stay, their little particular lustres
> Warmed by much handling.47

The female self finds reassurance in known objects rather than unknown truths.

> When the soles of my feet grow cold,
> The blue eye of my turquoise will comfort me.
> Let me have my copper cooking pots, let my rouge pots
> Bloom about me like night flowers, with a good
> smell.48

Notice that there is already a reference to apertures, off-shoots - "the mouth-hole", "the eye-hole", the carnival emphasise on the body as it "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."49 This will later fructify into core images in certain poems in Ariel as the body is represented as chopped and cut in pieces in accordance to the level of stress. In Plath's poems relating to pregnancy and childbirth too, this image of the body outgrowing itself becomes an important one. In "Last Words" it is still the image of the "full" body, here anointing itself for death and decay. The speaker thinks and speaks in the future tense although the death rite

---

47 "Last Words", op.cit, p.63.
48 ibid.
49 Rabelais and his World, op.cit, p.26.

that she refers to is specifically ancient. The embalming of the self recalls the rites of the ancient Egyptians although the deity evoked at the end of the poem is of Babylonian or Assyrian origin.

> They will roll me up in bandages, they will store my heart
> Under my feet in a neat parcel.
> I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,
> And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of
> Ishtar.50

"Ishtar", importantly enough, is the Goddess of love, fertility and war. That female identity is linked to the quest for love and fertility will be highlighted in Plath's poems on motherhood. Female identity, as specific poems in Crossing the Water have consistently indicated, is also created through linguistic warfare. This will be attested with greater intensity and power in the poems of Ariel. The image of ascent and transformation which will assume crucial significance in the Ariel poems, makes its first tentative appearance in Crossing the Water with the poem "Love Letter".

> I shone, mica-scaled, and unfolded
> To pour myself out like a fluid ---
>
> My finger-length grew lucent as glass. ---
> I started to bud like a March twig:
> An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.
> From stone to cloud, so I ascended.
> Now I resemble a sort of god
> Floating through the air in my soul-shift
> Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift.51

The tentative bid to power, the uncertainty of the interjection "a sort of god", will soon crystallize into powerful images - the "lioness" of "Purdah" [cf.Winter

50 "Last Words", op.cit, p.63.
51 "Love Letter", Crossing the Water, op.cit, pp.44-45.

Trees], the majestic queen bee of the Bee poems, the irrepressible Phoenix image of "Lady Lazarus" and the powerful image of "God's Lioness" in "Ariel". [cf. Ariel].

As a volume of transitional verse, Crossing the Water covers difficult ground and prepares the reader for the core images and techniques of Plath's later poetry, where "outlandish as a circus, the ravaged face/ Parades the marketplace."52

52 "The Ravaged Face", Collected Poems, op.cit, p.115.

AND THEN THE BODY TOLD HER STORY ---

The link between language, sexuality and the social construction of gender was an important conjunction for Plath. Here was a writer whose writing intimately reflected the deep ambivalence of relationships. Child and daughter, wife and mother and poet, - "the girl who wanted to be God",1 but who chose suicide instead at the age of thirty.

> One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous professor --- and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out ---
>
> 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.2

Plath's novel The Bell Jar, clearly depicts the struggle of the female persona to find a self unrestrained by social constructions of gender. In a wry, sardonic manner, the novel outlines the trauma and subsequent breakdown of the heroine Esther Greenwood as she struggles to position herself in the dominant socio-sexual nature of discourse. Her tragedy lies chiefly in the fact that she is unable to accept a position of compromise in discourses which prescribe the nature of female identity. Esther rejects the idea that man is "an arrow into the future"3 and searches instead for the

---

1 From Plath's "Diary Supplement dated November,13, 1949". Quoted in the Introduction of Letters Home, edited by Aurelia Plath, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1976.], p.40.
2 Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1966 edition.], p.80.
3 ibid, p.74.

means of adequately defining and defending her own desires.

> The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots of from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket.4

Both in The Colossus and in Crossing the Water there were conscious attempts to integrate and eventually dismiss images of the female self as an object dominated by the literary or literal Father figure[s]. Plath's poems relating specifically to pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood focus, for the first time, on the manner in which experience can authenticate the ownership of identity.

Power in patriarchal terms would undoudtedly be read as "dominance". The concept of motherhood as an ability to create and sustain life carries with it this capacity for domination. Yet as Adrienne Rich points out, motherhood invests the female body with a definite sense of paradox.

> The woman's body with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing life, has been through the ages a field of contradiction: a space invested with power and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, ---5

While analysing the poems in Crossing the Water, it was observed that textual travesties like parody and masquerade were employed to challenge the phallic superiority of traditional hierarchies in language. Such textual transgressions and transformations were often

---

4 The Bell Jar, op.cit, p.87.
5 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born - Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Adrienne Rich, [Virago Ltd., London, 1977.], p.102.

achieved through a deliberate yoking together of contraries. In poems relating specifically to the concept of motherhood, Plath projects the female body as the site of contradiction. The body becomes the signifier extraordinaire, a unique medium that translates the concept of motherhood and the actual experience of childbirth into writing. By deliberately foregrounding the body, Plath infuses the concept of motherhood with both the power of metamorphosis and with the vulnerability of corporeal frailty. Motherhood itself becomes a conjunction of power and powerlessness - at once a cultural event and natural phenomenon.

What is fascinating about Plath's response to the concept of motherhood is the way in which the poems pose questions about the ambivalent relationship between tha mother and child and the various ways in which these responses shape the written word. Through the early prose writings, journal entries and the letters home, there runs an insistence on the physicality of the written letter. Plath forges an extraordinarily close link between the body and language. Note the foregrounding of the body, the writing in of bodily sensations in this line from The Bell Jar -

"I fanned the hot milk on my tongue as it went down tasting it luxuriously the way a baby tastes its mother."6

The words themselves acquire a delicious sensuality as the primal act of bonding between the mother and child is translated from the biological to the specular.

---

6 The Bell Jar, op.cit, p.213.

Underlying the evident orality of the line is the psychological implications of the acts of nourishment and enunciation. The link between nourishment and enunciation, as noted in "Poem for a Birthday" in The Colossus, is an important one and must be examined in order to trace the manner in which Plath fuses the body with the word. The food image with the mouth as the orifice, receiving or rejecting the attentions of the Mother and the manifest Word with the tongue as the agent vocalizing internal and external realities, is a crucial conjunction for Plath.

> Mother, you are the one mouth
> I would be tongue to. Mother of otherness
> Eat me.7

The ambivalences of these lines are typical of Plath's poetics of birth in that articulation is viewed as a "difficult borning".8 Articulation becomes body-language as the shifting boundaries between the female self and the M[O]ther are acknowledged rather than repressed.

Often, in Plath's poems on the maternal condition, one sees a constant slippage between the roles of the mother, child and the mother as child.

> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its
> own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.9

Maternity can easily be used to valorise Woman as a cultural construct. Yet Woman has been, as Rich points

---

7 Sylvia Plath, "Poem for a Birthday", in The Colossus, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1967 edition.], p.72.
8 "The Manor Garden", ibid, p.1.
9 Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song", Ariel, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1965.], p.11.

out, unable to "define" the culture that she helps perpetrate. Women are categorized within masculine discourse as a space of contradiction and has been effectively disqualified "from the collective act of defining culture".10 The question is whether the female writer can attempt to define culture by turning the experience of motherhood into a potential form of discourse. Rich maintains that "this cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story."11 Can, and if so how will this great story be written? Can the maternal be viewed as a collective memory shared by mothers and daughters which, if used constructively as the basis of signification, could help centralize the female writer within the Symbolic?12 In other words, will pregnancy

---

10 Of Woman Born ---, op.cit, p.102.
11 ibid, p.225.
12 The term "Symbolic" was used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the naming, propositional, judgemental aspect of language, one that helped to affix a subject within language with a distinct identity of his own. [See Ecrits: A Selection, translated by Alan Sheridan, [Tavistock Publications, London, 1977.]. Julia Kristeva who expanded on Lacan's theory, sees the Symbolic as an important category in the signifying process. Kristeva divides the signifying process into two vast realms - the Symbolic and the Semiotic. The Semiotic is seen as engendered by the "chora" or the receptacle, which according to Kristeva, is the place of drive impulses that ground signification in movement and gesture before the subject can create signs and sentences. The Semiotic is the production of sounds, rhythm, movement, gestural modulations, - all of which are anterior to meaning - i.e. existing before lexical and syntactic organisation. The Semiotic is most noticeable in the rhythms of music and in the pre-verbal gurgle and gesture of the child. Although chronologically earlier than speech, the Semiotic always accompanies speech as a repressed underside. Kristeva points out that in dreams and in certain modern texts, like those written by Mallarmé or James Joyce, the Semiotic actually becomes dominant by breaking through the Symbolic nature of discourse.

and childbirth provide the female writer with a whole new set of symbols whereby she is able to define herself through an experience exclusively her own. The problem with privileging the maternal in this manner is that it is tantamount to making claims for a "specialised" form of discourse. Motherhood as a specialised form of discourse carries the danger of essentialism. Such a discourse would necessarily be reductionist in nature since it would be forced to register the sexual specificity of the speaking/writing subject. The very exclusivity will therefore only marginalise the female writer by discrediting her ability to signify except

---

According to Kristeva, the Symbolic is an extension of the "thetic" [i.e. the naming, logical, judging] part of personality. It is the major part of language that names and relates things. It is connected with semantic and syntactic competence, allowing for communication and rationality. The Symbolic is usually in control of the Semiotic, binding it to syntax and semantics. However, the Semiotic, by providing sound, rhythm and movement, is the essential "music" of articulation. The Symbolic is the domain of signification, of positions. It is this ability to take up a certain point of view that installs the identity of the subject in question. Kristeva maintains the Lacanian premise that "le nom du pere" conditions and controls the Symbolic. Within such a framework, Women are relegated to the peripheries of discourse in that they function as constructs of the Law of the Father that conditions the Symbolic structures of language. According to Kristeva, Women can find themselves within discourse only through a concerted effort to get back through their own body to the body of the Mother, the first recepient of the child's every demand. Maternal discourse is seen as the re-assertion of the Semiotic and as an ability to re-structure and re-deploy meaning as represented in the patriarchal nature of Symbolic discourse. See Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, translated by Margaret Waller, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1984.]; Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, translated by Thomas Gora, Leon Roudiez and Alice Jardine, [Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford, 1982.]; Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S.Roudiez, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1982.].

where there is a one-to-one correspondance between experience and symbolization. As Susan Suleiman points out, "it would be a pity if the male gesture of exclusion and repression of the female "other" were to be matched by a similar gesture in reverse --- Such a gesture necessarily places "feminine" writing in a minority position, wilfully ex-centric in relation to power."13 In Plath's case, the essentialist point of view is adroitly avoided by textual disruptions and reversals which eschew any sentimentality regarding the maternal condition.

Plath's writings on the mother-child relationship link shocking accusations with a tremulous sense of gratitude. The female self is seen forming and discarding images of itself through interactions with the Other. "I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and the other for the rest of my days"14 says Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar, epitomising the self's struggle for self definition. In Plath's writings, the female self's search for a space within maternal discourse, is quite literally a flight back and forth between emotional options. Motherhood, in Plath's writing, is looked upon both as the female writer's fulfilment of her role as a woman and as a potent threat

---

13 Susan R.Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood", in The [M]Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, edited by Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 1985.],pp.370-371.
14 The Bell Jar, op.cit, p.98.

to her role as a writer. Notice these fluctuations in Plath's intimate journal entries -

> After a while I suppose I'll get used to the idea of marriage and children. If only it doesn't swallow up my desire to express myself in a smug, sensuous haze. Sure, marriage is self-expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn't just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married.15

> "For a woman to be deprived of [conceiving]" --- was "a great and wasting death."16

> "Am I pregnant? --- Maybe some good pregnant poems if I really know I am."17

> "Children might humanize me. But I must rely on them for nothing. Fable of children changing existence and character as absurd as fable of marriage doing it."18

In the poems relating to motherhood, there is an uneasy adherence to the social views of Woman as a potential Mother. In the poem "Childless Woman", barrenness is revoked as the most deadly of social stigmas. So deadly is it that it can effectively dis-place Woman from the social fabric.

> The womb
> Rattles its pod, the moon
> Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.---
>
> Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
> Loyal to my image,
>
> Uttering nothing but blood -
> Taste it, dark red!19

The female subject is reduced to the space of the womb, seen here as infertile and hence socially useless. Her ability to articulate is deliberately aligned to the

---

15 The Journals of Sylvia Plath, edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, [Ballantyne Books, N.York, 1982.], p.15.
16 ibid, p.310.
17 ibid, p.300.
18 ibid, p.324.
19 Sylvia Plath, "Childless Woman", Winter Trees, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1971.], p.16.

rhythms of her physical body, the flow of menstrual blood in particular. The utter desperation at the inability to conceive is the "great and wasting death"20 that was referred to in the Journals. The natural phenomenon of menstruation, a cyclic sign of health, is here put through a violent form of reversal. The reversal and subsequent reproach of barrenness is due to the speculations of the social Other. To define Woman as womb-space is largely a patriarchal gesture stemming from a desire to view the difference that Woman represents through a social filter. "Childless Woman" functions within this masculine parameter. The failure to produce images through reproduction is therefore harshly equated to social castration and even death. The female subject faces the contention of being "rattled" from her self image, left with "nowhere to go".

The same sense of the horror of infertility is expressed in the poem "The Munich Mannequins".

> Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
> Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb
>
> Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
> The tree of life and the tree of life
>
> Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
> The blood flood is the flood of love,
>
> The absolute sacrifice.
> It means: no more idols but me,
>
> Me and you.21

---

20 The Journals ---, op.cit, p.310.
21 "The Munich Mannequins", Ariel, op.cit, p.74.

Written a little over a month of each other,22 "Childless Woman" and "Munich Mannequins" display remarkable similarity in terms of the central concern with the issues of life, death and articulation. In fact there is a striking replication of images from "Childless Woman" to "The Munich Mannequins". Trees, moons, the womb, the blood flood, idols, images with "nowhere to go" and "to no purpose", flow and converge into a singular comment on the link between the corporeal body and the physical word.

The act of signification in "Childless Woman" and "The Munich Mannequins" depict the female subject at a moment of conflict within a discursive process. Jacques Lacan has pointed out that the self in search of definition displays not just a desire to identify with the Other, but to desire what the Other desires.23 As such, the female child identifying with the M[O]ther, will desire the object choice of her Mother - i.e. the Father. Julia Kristeva points out the importance of the relationship between the young girl and her mother, "her greater difficulty than the boy in detaching herself from the

---

22 "Childless Woman" was written on 1, December, 1962 and "The Munich Mannequins" on the 28, January, 1963. cf. The Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1981.].

23 See Lacan's Ecrits: A Selection, op.cit, " --- man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognised by the other." [ibid, from "Function and field of speech and language", p.58.]. Lacan also states that "the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire for recognition" by the Other. [ibid, from "The Agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud", p.172.].

mother in order to accede to the order of signs as invested by the separation constitutive of the paternal function."24 Motherhood can then be looked upon as a supreme form of mimeseis as the female child comes closest to identifying with her mother "by becoming a mother herself".25 The relationship between the female child and her mother is one of the most difficult areas in psychoanalysis. The female child and her mother are locked in a space where love and hatred, gratitude and revenge conflict and alternate. These contradictory emotions largely condition the manner in which the female self articulates within the symbolic order.

> --- Her eternal debt to the woman-mother - make a woman more vulnerable within the symbolic order, more fragile when she suffers within it, more virulent when she protects herself from it.26

In Plath's relationship with her own mother and toward her children, much of this vulnerability and virulence is noticeable. A comparison between the tone in Plath's Letters Home and The Journals reveal the split between the carefully constructed, social self and the repressed, contradictory self within. It is the cultivated image of the dutiful daughter that forms the foundation of the Letters Home, that of a daughter repaying her debt to her mother through academic accolades.

---

24 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time", in The Kristeva Reader, edited by Toril Moi, [Basil & Blackwell, 1986.], p.204.
25 Kristeva points this out in her essay "Women's Time" - "A girl will never be able to re-establish this contact with her mother --- except by becoming a mother herself." See The Kristeva Reader, op.cit, p.204.
26 ibid, pp.204-205.

Dearest-Mother-whom-I love-better-than-anybody, --- I was one of the sixteen girls in the college up for the college elections ---27

Got straight A on that old English exam I took way back --- with a "This is an excellent paper" from the august Elizabeth Drew herself ---28

I have just been elected to Alpha Phi Kappa Psi --- So I am one of the two sophs chosen for creative writing ability.29

Aurelia Plath records and treasures Plath's comment at the age of fifteen - "When I am a mother, I want to bring up my children just as you have us."30

Yet when we turn to The Journals there is a complete reversal of image and tone. The vehemence of The Journals often attains disturbing proportions in the hatred and violence that it harbours towards the Mother figure.

--- it makes me feel good as hell to express my hostility for my mother; frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and my typewriter [why?] ---
So what does Mother know about love? Nothing --- I have done practically everything that she said that I couldn't do and be happy at the same time and here I am almost happy --- Except when I feel guilty, feel I shouldn't be happy because I am [not] doing what all the mother figures in my life would have me do. I hate them then --- My Mother had sacrificed her life for me. A sacrifice I didn't want ---31

It is important to note that despite the apparent violence of emotions expressed in The Journals, both mother and daughter can carry on a satisfactory letter relationship. This is because the letter can and does act as a medium of prevarication. Both mother and

---

27 Letters Home, op.cit, p.84. See Letter dated 17, March, 1952.
28 ibid, See Postcard, 10, April, 1952.
29 ibid, p.85. See Letter dated 30, April, 1952.
30 ibid, p.37. See Introduction.
31 The Journals of Sylvia Plath, op.cit, pp.267,268. See Entry dated Fri., 12, December, 1958-'59.

daughter can veil their contradictory feelings, emphasising upon the ideal image of what the relationship should be rather than what it is.

> --- we could both verbalize our desired image of ourselves in relation to each other: interest and sincere love, and never feel the emotional currents at war with these verbally expressed feelings.32

These emotional currents surface with lyrical intensity in the poem "Medusa" written much later in October, 1962, a few months before Plath's death.

> I didn't call you.
> I didn't call you at all.
> Nevertheless, nevertheless
> You steamed to me over the sea,
> Fat and red, a placenta
>
> Paralyzing the kicking lovers.
> Cobra light
> Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
> Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath,
> Dead and moneyless, ---
> Who do you think you are?
> A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
> I shall take no bite of your body,
> Bottle in which I live,
>
> Ghastly Vatican.33

The repetitions - "I didn't call you./ I didn't call you at all." - and the bluntness of the question - "Who do you think you are?" - work to brilliant effect in maintaining the fever-pitched pace of the lines. The hatred tangibly expressed in these lines is directed as much at the self as against the M[O]ther. The lines rail against the simultaneous recognition and refusal by the female self of its dependence on this powerful M[O]ther figure.

---

32 ibid, p.280. See Entry dated Sat., 27, December, 1958.
33 "Medusa", Ariel, op.cit, pp.45-46.

In order to disengage itself from this source of nourishment and sustenance, the self resorts to angry deprecations. The denunciations take on two forms - reversal and blasphemy. The M[O]ther figure is reversed and blasphemed in two dimensions - the biological and the religious - the "placenta" and the "Communion wafer". There is at first, a deliberate, violent reversal of the M[O]ther figure in her biological role of the life-giver, sustaining and nourishing the foetus to life. The placenta, the blood-link between the mother and child, is here represented as an agent of repression. In what is perhaps the most disturbing of transformations, the life-giving placenta becomes grotesquely menacing and deadly.

Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers.34

Notice that the emphasis is on grotesque physical proportions. The placenta is "fat" and the associations of ugliness are unmistakable. The placenta should ideally represent the "blood-flood" that Plath spoke of in "The Munich Mannequins", transforming itself into the "flood of love". But in the haste of the lines that follow, this generative resource of the Mother is rudely dismissed. Succour is replaced by paralysis, the blood-flow by poison in the veins, [the "cobra light"], and breath and life by asphyxation and death ["squeezing the breath" --- "I could draw no breath"].

---

34 ibid, p.45.

The poem opens with a grossly exaggerated sketch of the Mother as "the God-ball,/ Lens of mercies,".35 Notice the deliberate foregrounding of physical details -

> Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
> Eyes rolled by white sticks,
> Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,
> You house your unnerving head -36

The physical body is consistently stripped of its authority through the introduction of the carnival spirit of reversal in the poem. The physical contours of the opening lines are rapidly replaced by a sense of space within which the daughter, here, the central persona of the poem, struggles for identity. Represented variously as the "red stigmata at the very centre", the "old barnacled umblicus", the "Atlantic cable" and finally, the "fat", "red" "placenta", the figure of the Mother rapidly becomes less of a physical entity and more of a psychological presence.

What is interesting is that Plath has been able to balance a sense of temporality with the quality of timelessness that is so typical of the carnival. This temporal aspect is maintained through the introduction of autobiographical details - all of which help to locate the poem at a specific moment in the subject's life. "Medusa" was written during the stressful months of October, 1962, when Plath, separated from her husband Hughes, was alone in London. The "Atlantic cable", in the given circumstances, is a pithy description of the vital life-line that linked Plath to her mother, Aurelia

35 ibid.
36 ibid.

Plath, then residing in the United States. Yet there is no real sense of relief expressed at this opportunity to communicate -

> My mind winds to you
> Old barnacled umblicus, Atlantic cable,
> Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous
> repair.
>
> In any case, you are always there,
> Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
> Curve of water upleaping
> To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
> Touching and sucking.37

There is a sense of surfeit, of cloying excess attached to the attentions of the Mother. There is in "Medusa" a grim touch of humour, [the cable keeping itself in a state of "miraculous repair"], yet it is humour that hits back on itself. The carnival sense of joy at demolishing hierarchies is here clouded over by the intensity of the anger and violence at the root of the project. However, as Bakhtin stated, the laughter of the carnival is alwaya ambiguous - "it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking and deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives."38 "Medusa" conveys this sense of ambivalence as the female self recognises and revolts against the material dependence on the Mother. --- "he who is laughing also belongs to it."39

"Medusa" does read as an uncontained invective. Leading from the title, the poem hardly attempts to revert the image of the Greek gorgon, disembowelling and

---

37 ibid.
38 M.M.Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, translated by Helene Iswolsky, [The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, 1968.], pp.11-12.
39 ibid, p.12.

gorging her own children. The figure of Medusa has traditionally been used within the male system as a symbol of the castrating female. As part of our patriarchal inheritance, this is the image of the Terrible Mother. For the female self, the figure of Medusa, as a grasping mother, can come to represent the potentially paralyzing effect of the mother-daughter relationship. The critic Rose Kamel sees in "Medusa", a case of matrophobia whereby the mother becomes the anti-self, both feared yet deeply loved and identified with.40 In a letter to her brother Warren, Plath writes of her mother - "She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realised lately that we have to fight against her selfishness, as we would fight against a disease."41 In "Medusa" however, the female speaker not only invokes this figure of threat and terror but also confronts and claims as her own, the chthonic powers of this ambivalent matriarchal figurehead. As pretensions, hypocrisy and truths too painful to bear are remorselessly stripped bare, the female speaker acheives both a reconciliation with her mother and a new sense of her own strength. Adrienne Rich comments that matrophobia is "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's own mother --- Matrophobia can be seen as the womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, become

---

40 Rose Kamel, ""Reach hag hands and haul me in" - Matrophobia in the Letters of Sylvia Plath", Northwest Review, [1981.], pp.198-208.
41 Letters Home, op.cit, p.112.

individuated and free."42 The closing lines of "Medusa", "off, off, eely tentacle!/ There is nothing between us.", is a strident assertion of this new found sense of independence. The poem is thus, in many ways, therapeutic in nature as the female self works her way out of her dark and repressed fury. It is an attempt to cathect the mother figure, "the victim in ourselves",43 through a process of suffocating anger.

What saves "Medusa" from becoming a poem of pure raillery is the hint of the positive use of anger. Anger is contained and re-deployed by the manner in which the central figures of the Mother and daughter are positioned within a dyadic structure. The figure of the Mother becomes a threshold between nature and culture, the biological and the institutional. Hence the quick transition to the religious dimensions of motherhood. The rites of motherhood, that of attention and nourishment, are aligned to the rules of the Church. Once again there is an attempt to violently reverse consecrated ideals. The Virgin Mary, the sacreligious representation of the Ideal Mother, becomes "Blubbery Mary". "Blubbery" seems to be deliberately used because its earthy, colloquial feel pushes it as far as one can get from possible religious connotations. Jelly-like and bulbous, "Blubbery Mary" is a forceful replication of the fat, red placenta. The institution of religion seems to re-play at the spiritual level, the deadening effect of

---

42 Of Woman Born ---, op.cit, pp.235-236.
43 ibid, p.236.

the Mother's power over the child. The child in recognition of its inevitable dependence on both the institutions of religion and motherhood, can only retaliate through blasphemy and parody. Thus the grotesque parody of the body of Christ as the "Communion wafer", and the rude rejection of the body of the Mother as the "touching", "sucking" placenta, the "eely tentacle".

In placing the Mother at the threshold between nature and culture, the poem introduces a sense of dialogic tension. The Mother and child as individuated subjects are themselves reduced to nothingness. The focus is rather on the interaction between the concepts of birth and death, praises and curses, laughter and tears. This is the dyadic structure within which the female self *finds* herself. The female self is hence a product of the infinite potential for dialogue between the self and the Other. The establishment of all further hierarchies, is for the female self, a result of the dualisms that arise from this initial and unending dialogism.44

The enunciating subject in Plath's poems about children, through a series of ambivalences, does construct an image of itself as a "relation of

---

44 "Dialogism", a word popularised by Bakhtinian theorists, though never used by Bakhtin himself, is a means of categorizing the different ways in which Bakhtin meditated on the key issue of dialogue and the role it played in shaping existence. Bakhtin viewed the self as kinetic - an event, a relation, continuously shaping itself, rather than a construct, complete in itself. The concept of Dialogism is discussed at length in Michael Holquist's Dialogism - Bakhtin and his World, [Routledge, London, N.York, 1990.].

simultaneity".45 In these poems on children, divisions between the enunciating subject and its body and attempted mergers between the self and the Other become implicit. One of the most interesting features in Plath's poems on children is that it is the Child who functions as the Other to the female self. The child is often seen as an extension of the self. Plath's poems on children begin with the experience of her first pregnancy in 1959. A strict adherence to chronology would indicate that "The Manor Garden" written in November, 1959 is the first poem which attempts to explore the poet's ambiguous response to mothering. Written five months before the birth of Plath's first child Frieda,46 the poem introduces the female subject of enunciation at emotional crossroads. The imminent arrival of the child is counterpointed with the sadness involved in the dying year.

> The fountains are dry and the roses over.
> Incense of death. Your day approaches.
> The pears fatten like little buddhas. ---47

---

45 Holquist points out that the self, for Bakhtin, was a "relation of simultaneity". "No matter how conceived, simultaneity deals with the ratios of same and different in space and time." - See Dialogism - Bakhtin and his World, op. cit, p.19. Holquist points out that the concept of dialogism assumes "that at any given time, in any given place, there is a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions at work that will give the word uttered then and there a meaning that is different from what it would be at other times and in other places." See Dialogism ---, op.cit, p.69.

46 "The Manor Garden" was written in November,1959 and Plath's daughter, Frieda Rebecca, was born on 1,April, 1960. The poem opens her collection The Colossus which was first published by Heinemann in London in October, 1960.

47 "The Manor Garden", The Colossus, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1967 edition.], p.1.

There is a sense of waiting in the poem, a sense of dread which culminates in a mixed mood of joy and sadness.

> Head, toe and finger
> Come clear of the shadow. History
>
> Nourishes these broken flutings, ---
> You inherit white heather, ---
>
> Two suicides, the family wolves,
> Hours of blackness. Some hard stars
> Already yellow the heavens.48

The female subject of enunciation becomes, simultaneously the object of metamorphosis. There is indeed a momentous sense of change - the seasonal changes in the natural world matching the biological transformations in the woman's body. Unlike a later poem, "Three Women", there is no insistence on bodily details of the Mother as the object of change. In fact, as readers, we are confronted with the "difficult borning" and the "incense of death" in conceptual terms alone. "The Manor Garden" is however, an important poem in that it signals certain key issues which were to become central ones, chiefly in Plath's 1962 poems on pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. For instance, "The Manor Garden" points out the suspension of agency during pregnancy, a concept developed in "Three Women", written later in March, 1962. "The Manor Garden" also foregrounds the ambivalent responses to bodily processes as fulfilment and vulnerability, pleasure and danger, life and death co-exist in close proximity. These aspects are developed in later poems such as "You're"

---

48 ibid.

[Jan./Feb. 1960], "Mary's Song" [Nov. 1962.], "Nick and the Candlestick" [Nov. 1962.], "By Candlelight" [Oct. 1962.], "Balloons" [Feb. 1963.], "Child" [Oct.1963. What was merely a foreboding of danger/death in "The Manor Garden" becomes an insistence in these pre-natal poems.

In these prenatal poems, the slippage between the female self and the child, the Other, is an ongoing process occupying the interstices between the body and the word. The child as an extension of the self is always also the self. One way in which to observe the female self as it changes roles from mother to child and back to mother again, is by locating certain ambivalent responses to bodily processes within the text. Plath's poems relating to children, always maintain the oscillatory pulls between the sense of oneness and difference, of birth and death. The poems which bring out this structural tension most forcefully are those wherein the female self, recognises in the birth of the child, her relation to corporeality and to death.

You're clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful
thing. ---

Stalk without wrinkle, ---

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.49

In "Child", feelings of despair and tenderness alternate as the female self recognises its difference from her child. The same sense of separateness is displayed in "Morning Song". In what is perhaps an

49 "Child", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.12.

attempt to somehow order the chaotic experience of pregnancy and childbirth, the poem opens with the most unlikely of comparisons - that between the child and a "fat gold watch".50 There is a chilling sense of distance established by this mechanical image. This sense of alienation is further fortified by the next analogy -

> --- New statue.
> In a drafty museum, your nakedness
> Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as
> walls.51

There is a game of observation initiated here with the parents as onlookers and with the child as the object of ornamentation, the cynosure of the gaze. Yet it is not these intellectual attempts at ordering the experience of childbirth that dominates the poem. What dominates the poem is the "bald cry" and the "moth-breath" of the child. If the first three stanzas of the poem were measured to distance, the last three function as invigoratingly tender recordings of the close bond between the mother and child.

> --- I wake to listen:
> A far sea moves in my ear.
>
> One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
> In my Victorian nightgown.52

The poem itself reverberates with the first pre-verbal gurgle and gesture of the child. The "bald cry" at the start of the poem is steadily transformed to the "clear vowels" at the end. The emphasis on the body, as the

---

50 "Morning Song", Ariel, op.cit, p.11.
51 ibid.
52 ibid.

child comes into being, is unmistakable. The midwife slapping the child's "footsoles", the "cow-heavy", attentive mother, the child with its mouth open "as clean as a cat's" - all of these figures are definite physical presences in the poem. It is this awareness of physical detail that brings to the Mother the recognition and attempted refusal of her own mortality. Even if she does attempt to "find" herself through the child, she is painfully aware that the hope of preservation always includes the possibility of extinction.

> I am no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its
> own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.53

The same sense of tenderness and anguish is evoked in the poem "Candles". The poem using flickering candles as a structural backdrop, juxtaposes the vulnerability of the sleeping child with the greater vulnerability of the onlooking Mother.

> The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open.
> In twenty years I shall be retrograde
> As these draughty ephemerids.
>
> I watch their split tears cloud and dull to pearls.
> How shall I tell anything at all
> To this infant still in a birth-drowse?54

The vulnerability of the two central players in this drama of metamorphosis is captured by Plath's exceptional phrase "birth-drowse". How compellingly different is this phrase to the "fat gold watch" that we encountered earlier. In the "birth-drowse" of the child, the Mother

---

53 ibid.
54 "Candles", Crossing the Water, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1971.], p.42.

recognizes the "godawful hush"55 of death that beckons as it terrifies.

The Kristevan theory of abjection is most useful in explaining the interface between identity and symbolization that Plath attempts in her poems relating to maternity. Abjection, a term introduced by Kristeva, is a border-line phenomenon.

> We may call it a border: abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while retaining its hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens [sic] it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.56

Childbirth is a bodily process that needs to first be ordered and contained if it is to be transcribed in the significatory processes of writing. The abject as a border-line phenomenon, demonstrates the impossibility of such clear-cut divisions. Elizabeth Grosz, in an essay on Kristeva, points out that " the symbolic requires that a border separate or protect the subject from this abyss that beckons and haunts it --- It is an insistence on the subject's necessary relation to animality and to materiality, being the subject's recognition and refusal of its corporeality."57 It is on this border between pleasure and danger, nature and culture, life and death that the Mother and Child converge and separate. As such, ambivalent and disturbing reactions must

---

55 "For a Fatherless Son", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.33.
56 Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S.Roudiez, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1982.], p. 9.
57 Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification", in Abjection, Melancholia and Love - The Works of Julia Kristeva, edited by John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, [Routledge, London, N.York, 1990.], p.89.

necessarily collate with the fascinating experience of motherhood. In two poems, "Nick and the Candlestick" and "By Candlelight", written as companion pieces in October, 1962, this ambiguous, border-line phenomenon finds expression.

Both poems use the candle, itself a symbol of impermanence, as the central image to reflect and counterpoint the apparently inviolable world of the Mother and Child. The emphasis in both poems is on a fluid, shimmering ambience and a definite sense of interiority.

> This is the fluid in which we meet each other,
> This haloey radiance that seems to breathe
> And lets our shadows wither
> Only to blow
> Them huge again, violent giants on the wall.58

In "By Candlelight", the symbiotic union between the child and the mother in this surreal, candlelit world, quickly becomes a metaphor for the relationship between the mother's unwavering sense of the child's reality and her perception of her own nightmare world of shifting realities. While the mother's world is narrowing into a state of self enclosure, ["the sack of black! It is everywhere, tight, tight!"], 59 she comes to depend on the child for a sense of continuity and wholeness.

"Nick and the Candlestick" explores at least three images of interiority - the miner deep in the earth:

> I am a miner. The light burns blue.
> Waxy stalactites
> Drip and thicken, tears

---

58 "By Candlelight", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.28.
59 ibid.

The earthen womb
Exudes from its dead boredom.60

the mother and her child wrapped in womb-like imagery:

O love, how did you get here?
O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,
Your crossed position.
The blood blooms clean
In you, ruby.
The pain
You wake to is not yours.61

and the self as it comes to grips with external reality by viewing the child as the repository of hope and perpetuation:

Let the stars
Plummet to their dark address,

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.62

All three images bring in overtones of an underground world with connotative links with the subconscious, the subaltern, the maternal. The child viewed as a panacea, is seen to be more effective than religion in offering solace and assurance to the Mother. The poem ends with an overt reference to the Nativity of Christ. "The baby in the barn", that symbol of hope, cancels out the distortions of "a piranha/ Religion" that drains and stifles life with its pompous institutional gestures. The baby is the light of the Mother's world, the candle which dispels the shadow of doubt and fear and replaces

60 "Nick and the Candlestick", Ariel, op.cit, p.40.
61 ibid, pp.40-41.
62 ibid, p.41.

them with giant, if surreal, prospects of hope. With the Christ-child analogy comes associations of redemption but also of the recreation of the self. The poem records the movement from fear and depression to optimism - from the dark underground world of the miner to the solid security of the "baby in the barn".

With the Christ-child analogy, there is an attempt to win back the consecrated image of the Ideal Mother. The Virgin Mary as a powerfully emotive symbol of self sacrifice, operates as a subaltern presence, a sub-textual ripple in "Nick and the Candlestick". The enunciating subject of the poem, by adopting this role of the Ideal Mother, becomes a powerful site of contradiction - at once powerful in initiating change but powerless in controlling its consequences.

The same sense of ambivalence is projected in "Mary's Song". Beginning with a domestic weekend scene, the poem catapults into memory and forceful recapitulation of two of history's worst examples of persecution - the Crucifixion and the Holocaust.

> The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat. ---
>
> The same fire
>
> Melting the tallow heretics,
> Ousting the Jews.
> Their thick palls float
>
> Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out
> Germany. ---
>
> Mouth-ash, ash of eye.
> They settle. On the high
>
> Precipice

That emptied one man into space ---63

The female persona in the poem, sees the suffering of the Virgin Mary as personal because the repeated holocausts of history are contained in her heart as she helplessly contemplates the baby who will be initiated into suffering. The Mother as an analogy to the Virgin, an instrument of metamorphosis, is as defenseless to prevent change as she is powerful to initiate it.

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in,
O golden child the world will kill and eat.64

Notice the transference of the "Mary-image" from the female persona's mother in "Medusa" to the female persona, herself a mother now in "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Mary's Song". "Blubbery Mary", "Virgin Mary" meet and reflect the relativized nature of the discourse of motherhood.

The reference to the role of the Virgin Mary and to Christ's Nativity is important in that it helps place maternal discourse on the brink between life and death, language and instinctual drive. Kristeva in her lyrically intense essay "Stabat Mater", speaks of the need for an "heretical ethics" --- "an herethics" which "in life makes bonds, thoughts, and therefore the thought of death bearable."65 Maternity, in Plath's poems, becomes the site of this bonding, the pre-verbal, symbiotic union between the mother and child. The bond

---

63 "Mary's Song", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.39.
64 ibid.
65 Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater", in The Kristeva Reader, op.cit, p.185. First published as "Herethique de l'amour" in Tel Quel, 74, [Winter, 1977], pp.30-49.

also functions as a precondition of the Symbolic, preparing for the division or splitting off of flesh, of mother from child, preceding the initiation into language.66

> A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the flesh. And consequently a division of language.
> Then there is this other abyss that opens up between the body and what has been its inside: there is the abyss between the mother and child.67

---

66 According to Kristeva, the initiation into the Symbolic is completed in two stages - [a] the mirror stage and [b] the castration complex. The mirror stage or "le stade du miroir" as explicated by Jacques Lacan, is the stage at which the pre-linguistic child achieves an image of itself in totality, separate from the rest of the world. The child, at first intuits an image of itself as a real being. Before long, the child discovers that this is nothing but an image that cannot be grasped or seized. Finally, the child recognises the image as an "image of itself" and learns to identify between the self and the image of the self. Lacan sees this moment of recognition of the self and other as the moment of initiation into aticulation/speech. [See Lacan's Ecrits: A Selection, op.cit, and Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and The Ecole Freudienne, edited by Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, [Macmillan, London, 1982.]. Kristeva points out that the fear of castration completes this initiation into the Symbolic [i.e. the ability to rationally name, judge.]. The Mother, hitherto the sole recipient of every demand of the child, is gradually separated from the child. With this gradual detachment of the child from the mother, there comes a lack, an absence. This lack or absence can only be represented by a figurative substitute - an image or representation. Speech arises as an attempt to fill this lack. The mother now becomes an "Other", someone for whom and to whom speech is made and directed. The installation of the Symbolic preceded as it is by a separation from the Mother,is what allows the imposition of the Law of the Father. The adult subject's identity will therefore be rooted in the specific intermixing of the Semiotic and the Symbolic, the rejection and acceptance of the Law, the assertion and the repression of the maternal link. For the female subject, in particular, the re-assertion of the maternal becomes a crucial factor in the definition of identity, the only real means of truly re-presenting herself within the masculine parameters of discourse. [See Revolution in Poetic Language, op.cit, Desire in Language ---, op.cit, and Powers of Horror ---, op.cit.].

67 "Stabat Mater", op.cit, p.179.

Until the split occurs and is acknowledged as such, the illusion of immortality remains. Until such time, the Mother and Child believe that by an osmotic process they can sustain and regenerate each other indefinitely. With the split into language, with enunciation, comes the "godawful hush".

> You will be aware of an absence, presently,
> Growing beside you, like a tree,
> A death tree, ---
> --- an illusion, ---
>
> But right now you are dumb.
> And I love your stupidity,
> The blind mirror of it. I look in
> And find no face but my own, and you think that's funny. ---
>
> One day you may touch what's wrong
> The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the godawful hush.
> Till then your smiles are found money.68

Plath's poems on the maternal condition concentrates for the first time, on the physical body as an articulable medium for the female self. Here, the female self does not need to seek recourse to the voices of the Father[s] in order to express a sense of identity. The bond between the Self and Mother, Mother and Child, lend to these poems a certain softness in images and a particular vulnerability in tone that are quite unprecedented in the Plath canon. The troubling sense of ambiguity operative in these poems is different when compared to its function in the lyrics of 1962.69 In what is perhaps the only instance of its kind in Plath's writing, the Other is seen as both separate from the Self

---

68 "For a Fatherless Son", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.33.
69 This is discussed in further detail in the next chapter, i.e. Chapter 4.

and as an extension of the Self. It is by holding the many ambivalences of maternal discourse in fine balance that the female self in Plath's "motherhood" poems authenticates the possession of a specific identity.

THE "OTHER" SIDE OF WRITING

Although Plath sometimes spoke about "the positive acceptance of conflict, uncertainty and pain as the soil for true knowledge and life"1, she most often channelled ambiguity and contradiction into sets of bi-polar oppositions. In earlier poems like "In Plaster", there was ample evidence of the combat between the good, "plaster-saint" self and the murderous "sinner" self. Typical of Plath's ambivalence, the equations were never that simplistic, for the murderous self was often the "true" self while the "plaster-saint" was the meretricious surface, the false self. As we turn to Plath's late poetry, especially the lyrics that she wrote in 1962, we notice that this interest in the double becomes an enduring one. It becomes an obsession that the female self must deal with as it works itself toward some sort of narrative that must ultimately shake itself free of the debilitating Other. These lyrics are quite unlike the "motherhood" poems, analysed in the previous chapter, where there was a palpable attempt to fuse with the "Other", especially with the "otherness" represented by the figure of the child. Potential rivals, both male and female are located as the self attempts to define and, most importantly defend the parameters of its own desire. Before the fear of the Other is appropriated

---

1. Sylvia Plath, Letter to Warren Plath, Postmarked 7 May, 1957, in Letters Home, edited by Aurelia Plath, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London, 1976.], p.311.

into a positive statement of power, there are definite attempts to establish, define and demean the rival through a pattern of alternatives.

In April 1962, before the frenzied writing of the October lyrics, Plath composed "Elm", a poem which dealt explicitly with a mood of unease and unnameable anxiety.

> I am terrified by this dark thing
> That sleeps in me;
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its
> malignity. ---
>
> Are those the faces of love, those pale
> irretrievables?
> Is it for such I agitate my heart?2.

In "Elm", the tree is projected as the anthropomorphized representation of the self's struggle. When the poem opens, the elm is already invested with human abilities to experience and respond to pain and suffering. The tree becomes a long standing symbol of the "atrocity of sunsets".3.

> I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great
> tap root:
> It is what you fear.
> I do not fear it: I have been there.4.

Having experienced fear and having absorbed it, the elm becomes a symbol of survival.

> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.5.

---

2. Sylvia Plath, "Elm", Ariel, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London, 1965.], p.26. "Elm" was written on 19 Apr.,1962. See Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London, 1981.], p.193.
3. ibid, Ariel, op.cit, p.25.
4. ibid.
5. ibid.

Unlike the poet/self, the elm seems to function as a self-sufficient entity, superior in its foreknowledge of pain and suffering. Advice and warning therefore come naturally -

> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it
> Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like
> a horse.6.

There is, however, a change of mood from stanza seven of the poem. The Elm, previously viewed as strengthened through the knowledge of pain, is now seen as vulnerable. From here on the relationship between the Elm as the symbolic representation of the self's trauma and the self as the centre of atrocity begins to overlap: "How your bad dreams possess and endow me."7. The "I - you" distances observed before now begin to blur.

> All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing.8.

Notice Plath's growing control over language where one image slides into another. It is the abstract concept of love that is first concretised through the image of an impetuous horse. The uncontrollable nature of love as also its inconsistency is lyrically captured by the image of the runaway horse. This image now fluidly synthesises with the image of the Elm, riding, galloping "impetuously" in the wind. The self is instructed to observe and cope with adversities. It is a learning

---

6. ibid.
7. ibid, p.26.
8. ibid, p.25.

process that is long and perhaps unresolved: "till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf."9. In "Ariel", written later, in October '62, this same horse-rider image improves into a resounding statement on art and the aesthetic process. The control over language and imagery is indeed the highpoint of Plath's October lyrics especially in poems like "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah".

As the distinctions between the self and its representative, the Elm disappear, the former image of steely implacability against adversities - "burn and stand" - is replaced by the image of *le corps morcele*: the body in bits and pieces in response to unbearable levels of stress.

> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.10.

What is emphasised most is the vacuousness of both the self and its symbolic index, the Elm. Significantly enough it is the moon that is picked out as the cruel enemy in this drama of traumatization.

> The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
> Cruelly, being barren.
> Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught
> her.
>
> I let her go. I let her go
> Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.11.

The moon image was one that Plath used most consistently to represent the threat of the female Other.

---

9. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. ibid, pp.25-26.

Notice the terrifying mixture of fear and desire in these lines from "The Rival" written earlier in July, 1961-

> If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
> You leave the same impression
> Of something beautiful, but annihilating.
> Both of you are great light-borrowers.
> Her O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is
> unaffected,12.

In "The Moon and the Yew Tree", [Oct.1961.], the moon is again viewed as the symbol of despair and doom.

> The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
> White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
> It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is
> quiet
> With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.13.

Notice the overrunning of images and words- the "O-mouth" of "The Rival" becomes the "O-gape" of "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the implications of barrenness and despair becoming bleaker and more chilling in the accretion of associations. In "Elm", the moon is "cruel", "barren", "merciless" with a "radiance" that is "beautiful but annihilating". The moon continues to function as a symbol of power "dragging" the self into a whirlpool of destruction. Notice how Plath uses the fact that the moon has the power to control the seas. "Elm" speaks of a sea of "dissatisfactions".14. It is this that the moon-rival creates and most importantly, controls.

While the source of anxiety and the element of threat is only referred to but remains unseen in "Elm", the fear

---

12."The Rival", Ariel, op.cit, p.53, Written in July,1961. See Collected Poems, op.cit, p.166.
13."The Moon and the Yew Tree", Ariel, op.cit, p.47, Written in Oct.1961. See Collected Poems, op.cit, p.173.
14. "Elm", Ariel, op.cit, p.25.

syndrome is more localized in "The Rival". By "Lesbos" [Oct.1962.], and "The Fearful" [Nov.1962.], it is clear that what the self is threatened with is the loss of faith and happiness with the loss of love. The rival, Other woman most typically contests the threatened self in the field of love and domestic happiness.

O vase of acid,
It is love you are full of. You know who you hate.15.

The female rival is seen as a powerful annihilating force who can rob the self of the means to define herself. In what can be seen as a defensive move, the self therefore seeks to debase the rival by foregrounding the rival's chief weakness: her inability to procreate. Barrenness is the bitter castigation that the self under threat levels at female rivals, either actual or potential.

She hates

The thought of a baby-
Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty-

She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit,16.

In a wholly ironic manner, barrenness is equated with perfection. Yet we only have to refer to a later poem, "The Munich Mannequins" for the clearest definition of

15. "Lesbos", Collected Poems, op.cit, p.229. Although Plath intended to include this poem in Ariel, Hughes omitted it in the published version of Ariel in 1965. Instead "Lesbos" is grouped with the collection of poems that form Winter Trees, published in 1971. The effect of Hughes's arbitrary grouping of Ariel,1965 is dealt with in greater detail in the next chapter.
16."The Fearful", Collected Poems, op.cit, p.256. Written on 16, Nov.1962, this poem does not figure either in Plath's list for Ariel or in the published version of Ariel in 1965

the relationship between barrenness, fertility and perfection.

> Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
> Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb ---
>
> The tree of life and the tree of life
>
> Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
> The blood flood is the flood of love.17.

As I had discussed in the previous chapter on Plath's "motherhood" poems, the creation of both babies and poems was something that assumed tremendous importance for the female self struggling to defend its own parameters.18. Procreation, both biographical and literary, was the surest sign of victory for the self over the threatening rival woman. The rival is distanced and controlled by the force of conceptual oppositions - childlessness as opposed to motherhood; barrenness as against fertility. As Judith Kroll points out the rival is viewed not just as the "other" woman but as a "mythic oppositeness embodying a rival way of being."19.

What the self fears most from the rival woman is the invasion of her territory of love. As "Elm" pointed out, the self desperately searches for a safe haven and tries to define herself more completely by those that she loves

---

17."The Munich Mannequins", Ariel, op.cit, p.74. Written on 23,Jan.1963. See Collected Poems, op.cit, pp.262-263.
18. Plath included in her list for Ariel, "Nick and the Candlestick", "The Night Dances", "You're"- poems that portray the tender affections of a mother, as also her sense of ambivalence towards her child. This has been discussed in the previous chapter in greater detail.
19. Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology, [Harper & Row Pub., N.York, 1976.], p.2.

and is loved by.20 It is however, a hunt for the "irretrievables", a desire for safety where there is none.

Are those the faces of love, those pale
irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face?
So murderous in its strangle of branches?-

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow
faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.21.

Petrification and the loss of articulation are the first reactions that take place when the self confronts the rival woman. This was the most striking image of "Medusa", a poem that was analysed in the previous chapter. It is the mother figure that is accused as the main rival , one that denies and obstructs the attempts of the daughter to find her own self narrative.

You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralysing the kicking lovers.
Cobra light
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath.22.

"Lesbos", written in October, 1962, again introduces the image of stultification-

Viciousness in the kitchen! ---

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.

---

20. "Elm", Ariel, op.cit.
21. ibid, p.26.
22. "Medusa", Ariel, op.cit, p.45.

I do not speak.23.

"Lesbos" marks a highpoint in domestic crisis and is charged with anger and frustration against the apparent superiority of the rival woman.

Once you were beautiful.
In New York, in Hollywood, the men said: "Through?
Gee baby, you are rare."24.

This is the glamourous image that is placed in the speaker's familiar kitchen surroundings. The resulting incongruity is between this glittering image of the rival and the comparitively dowdy image of the speaker in the midst of the "stink of fat and baby crap".25. The sardonic humour in the poem is relentlessly in search of bi-polar oppositions intended to establish the rival as the absolute "other" to the self. Again, it is the contrasting impact of barrenness and fecundity that the self employs to degrade the "other" woman. The rival is credited with one child but even that is seen as inadequate. In a voice that is almost petty in its childish glee, the self records its personal triumph- "You have one baby, I have two."26. The emphasis is however on the fact that this is one record that the rival can never set straight. The rival woman is doubly condemned, for her own decision not to have children and for her husband's impotence to have any.

You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio
Clear of voices and history, the staticky

---

23. "Lesbos", Winter Trees, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London,1971.], pp. 34,35,36.
24. ibid, p.35.
25. ibid.
26. ibid, p.34.

Noise of the new. ---
You say your husband is just no good to you.
His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl.27.

As the hatred between the two women deepen, images of hell proliferate and the safety of the kitchen is replaced by an atmosphere of menace.

The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,
Our bones, our hair.28.

The "oppositeness" is complete, articulation becomes impossible and the silence between the two women is total- "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet."29.

It must be remembered however that early in the poem, the speaker describes herself, even if sarcastically, as a "pathological liar". The poem ends with a second reference to "lying", this time including the rival - "you know what lies are for".30. This brings us to the question at the heart of the poem. How absolute is the division of the two women in their hatred for each other? Despite the angry claims that they "shan't meet", there is a point of convergence. The self and the rival are united in the realisation that the actual object of their hatred is the male figure, in this case, the husband. Both women are bound together in the recognition of his lies, his pretences and his power. The kitchen, the children, even their own estimation of beauty and sexuality become approximations that are mediated by the male gaze.

---

27. ibid.
28. ibid, p.35.
29. ibid, p.36.
30. ibid.

We come to appreciate here the irony in Plath's choice of title. Lesbos, according to Ancient Greek legend was the centre of Greek lyric poetry around the sixth and seventh century B.C. Presided over by the lyric poet Sappho, it could be seen as representative of a female intellectual community in a culture that was quite unequivocally stressed the hegemonic power of the patriarch. In the poem, the only "intellectual" pursuit that the women share is their experience of suffering or disappointment at the hands of men. What is stressed however, is not communal sharing to help understand and lessen the pain but the frightening isolation of the two women themselves. Amid the "stink" and "crap" of domesticity, there is a hint of potential protest against male ideologies. As yet, there is only a recognition of the extent to which male hegemony over cultural and linguistic representation can dis-place the female self in search of self definition. There is no move yet to appropriate male power.

In poems that deal with the male figure as the explicit source of threat, the sense of troubling bi-polar oppositions are stretched to its extreme. As The Journals and Letters Home testify, there are only two alternative kinds of vocabulary in relation to the male figure - that which represents the threat of suffocation and paralysis or that which speaks of the idealism of perfect union. As always, the Letters Home, written explicitly for an audience, prefers the hyperbole of idealism, leaving the more disturbing overtones of the

stifling nature of the male as "counterpart" to the more private Journal entries.

---I can't for a minute think of him [Ted] as someone "other" than the male counterpart of myself, always just that many steps ahead of me intellectually and creatively so that I feel very feminine and admiring.31.

Everything I do with and for Ted has a celestial radiance, be it only ironing and cooking, and this *increases* with custom, instead of growing less--- Perhaps, most important, our writing is founded in the inspiration of the other and grows by the proper, inimitable criticism of the other, and publications are made with the joy of the other.32.

Even though this rhetoric of idealism becomes increasingly difficult to maintain by the letters of late 1962,33in the face of a crumbling marriage, the mask of a gallant, happy self is stll not dropped. "So happy I can hardly speak"34is still the tone that the self strives for despite the acknowledgement that "being catapulted from the cowlike happiness of maternity into loneliness and grim problems is no fun."35.

The last few entries that Plath made in her journals are either locked away, destroyed or, we are told, simply lost.36. However, throughout the published Journals,

31. Letters Home, op.cit, p.270. [11, Sept,1956.].
32. ibid, p.276. [8, Oct,1956.].
33. In a letter dated 27,Aug,1962, Plath speaks of a "separation from Ted"- see Letters Home, op.cit, p.460. In another dated 9, Oct,1962, she refers to a "divorce"- p.465.
34. Letters Home, op.cit, p.477. [7, Nov.1962.].
35. ibid, p.498. [4, Feb.1963.].
36. See The Journals of Sylvia Plath, op.cit. In the Foreword, Hughes states- "two more notebooks survived for a while--- and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it [in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival.]. The other disappeared." [Foreword, p.xv.]. The published Journals end with Plath's

there are many attacks on the idealized image of union that the Letters Home laboured to project. The Journals record the tirades, irritations, the "acrid fights",[J,p.278.], the "hostile silences", [J,p.304.], the "killing words"[J,p.146.]. A long journal entry soon after Plath's wedding in 1956, is in stark contrast to the delirious happiness expressed in the letters, written around the same time, to her mother.

> Wrongness grows in the skin and makes it hard to touch.--- No sleep, smothering--- with wrongness growing and filling the house like a man-eating plant--- All could happen: the willful drowning, the murder, the killing words--- And all the time wrongness is growing, creeping, choking the house, twining the tables and chairs and poisoning knives and forks, clouding the drinking water with that lethal taint. Sun falls off-key on eyes asquint, and the world has grown crooked and sour as a lemon overnight.37.

When we turn to Plath's late poetry, it is this sense of growing "wrongness" and "sourness" that is unequivocally stressed. The male figure is openly named as the source and agent of threat. The female self can no longer try to assimilate the voices of the patriarch as was the case in the poems of The Colossus. The self's attempt to glorify the patriarch by remaining subservient to his ideologies must now be rejected due to the recognition that male hegemony will only strangle and obstruct the emergence of a new, distinctly feminine voice. This, as Pamela Annas points out traps the poet/self "between sets of mutually exclusive

---

impressions and sketches of friends and neighbours, dating upto 16, May '62. There is a distinct wedging out of matters closer to the heart.
37. J., op.cit, pp.146-147. [23, Jul.1956.].

alternatives."38. Hence the balancing act in the late poetry of '62, where each idea or force is juxtaposed with its obverse negation. The postulations of God and the devil; Jew and Nazi; Joy and despair; Friend and enemy; matter and creative spirit. In the poems of early '62 like "The Rabbit Catcher" and on to "The Jailer" and "Daddy" in late '62, these oppositions invested in the dominant male figure lie in troubling proximity to each other. The male figure becomes a disturbing mixture of alternatives. In that ambivalence lies the degree of pleasure and danger that he offers the female self.

"The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Jailer", capture in full the force of ambivalence that the male figure represents for the vulnerable female self in search of a narrative of its own. The male figure is both the source of threat and the object of desire. These two poems are important in that they provide the link in the chain leading on to the apotheosis of the female self in later poems like "Fever 103", "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus". In "The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Jailer", the male figure is identified as everything that blocks, hides, stifles or obstructs female creativity. Male hegemony is represented both in the victimization of the female body and in the difficulty of articulation, of finding a new voice.

In "The Rabbit Catcher", the leitmotif of the chase is used to emphasise the plight of the female

---

38. Pamela J.Annas, A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, [Greenwood, N.York, 1988.], p.161.

persona/self in thrall of the powerful male. The female self identifies with the quarry of the chase, the rabbit who is so mesmerically drawn into its trap by the cunning ploys of the male "catcher". In identifying with the victim, the female self seems to passively accept the position of vulnerability, automatically awarding the male figure with an indelible sense of power.

> It was a place of force-
> The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
> Tearing off my voice, and the sea
> Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
> Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.39.

Nature and the elements, as in the poems of The Colossus, are imbued with a sense of masculine aggression. Nature seems to condone and indeed actively participate in this masculine attack on the defenseless female self. At one stroke, the female self is stripped of "voice" ["tearing off my voice"] and of sight ["blinding me with its lights"]. Yet, notice that the female self participates in her own persecution. She is also partly the agent of violence. The wind can only gag her effectively with her "own blown hair". Yet the dramatic import of the opening line- "it was a place of force"- locates the female self in the position of an unwilling participant in this scheme of violence. The logic of the lines reinforce that the female self "has been" gagged and rendered voiceless. This, however, is a status that is given to the female self only momentarily.

---

39. "The Rabbit Catcher", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.25. Written on 21, May 1962. See Collected Poems, op.cit, p.193. Plath intended to include this poem in Ariel.

As an unwilling participant, the female self would unequivocally come to be regarded as the absolute victim of patriarchal domination.

> I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
> Its black spikes,
> The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
> They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
> And were extravagant, like torture.40.

The second stanza dramatically reverses the position of the female self in relation to the ordeal, the "force" that she struggles against. This stanza defines "the malignity", the "blackness" of that "place of force" that the self remembers at the start of the poem. It is important to see "The Rabbit Catcher" as a recollection. The poem runs throughout in the past tense although the sense of movement, struggle and chase brings in the sense of the present continuous. The use of the past tense allows the persona/poet/self to re-construct from memory the dangers of this "place of force".

The danger is double-edged, for it brings with it both fear and desire. Torture becomes hurtful like the spiky gorse, maligning the object with its venom. Yet it is also referred to as "a great beauty", a spectacular extravagance. This leads us to the appropriateness of the sudden religious inflection with the word "extreme unction". The reference is to the rite administered by Catholic priests to the dying for the peace of the body and the soul; a rite that promises the recipient of a better life after death. Notice once again Plath's

---

40. ibid.

obversely negated oppositions working closely together. The malign gorse carries its panacea "the yellow candle-flowers". Yet, the beauty of the flowers is deceptive for their splendour conceals the tortuous "black spikes". "Extreme unction", life at the moment of death makes death itself a painful pleasure, desired though feared. The word itself, I find is too loosely employed, with the poet expecting the reader to call upon immediate associations in order to legitimize its relevance in the images with which it is linked. However, the oxymoronic readings that open up in the context of the poem through the use of the phrase "extreme unction", lead to the startling assertion that torture can be an experience that is beautiful, spectacular and dangerous simultaneously. The logic behind this acceptance of the relative and ambivalent nature of pleasure and danger, power and powerlessness becomes a crucial one in understanding Plath's key October lyrics- the bee sequence, "Daddy", "Fever 103", "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus". From this logic of ambivalence develops the carnival, the spectacle of these late poems.

I now come the main question that "The Rabbit Catcher" confronts the reader with. What is "the place of force" or simply "the force" that the poem describes in such detail? Forces of Nature, the strength of the elements and the powered aggression of the male figure immediately offer themselves as possible answers. Yet, the aestheticizing of power is defined in two specific areas- the sexual and to a lesser degree, the linguistic.

The nature of this "force, its perpetrator and the "place" or site on which this force is applied become equally important in the final analysis. The female body is identified as the site of both pain and pleasure and the masculine assault is likened to an efficient and highly organised scheme of both violation and violence.

Jacqueline Rose in her analysis of "The Rabbit Catcher" states that the poem deals explicitly with the "trap" of sexuality.41.

> For sexuality that it writes cannot be held to a single place - it spreads, blinds, unreels like oil in the sea. Most crudely, that wind blowing, that gagging, calls up images of oral sex and then immediately turns it around, gagging the speaker with her own blown hair, her hair in her mouth, her tasting the gorse [Whose body - male or female - is this? Who - man or woman - is tasting whom?], even while "black spikes" and "candles" work to hold the more obvious distribution of gender roles in their place.42.

While I do agree that sexuality is a key issue in the poem, I do not accept Rose's argument that there is "uncertainty" in the expression of a stable sexual identity. If "The Rabbit Catcher describes a trap of sexuality within which the female self is located, it is a trap only because it is culturally and linguistically designed according to masculine parameters. It is a trap that lures the female self to search for the obvious

---

41. Jacqueline Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, [Virago Press Ltd. London,1991.], pp.139-140. In her Preface, Rose points out how her interpretation of "The Rabbit Catcher" had been "the object of heated and unresolved dispute."[p.xiii]. "I was told by Ted Hughes that my analysis would be damaging for Plath's [now adult] children and that speculation of the kind I was seen as engaging in about Sylvia Plath's sexual identity would in some countries be "grounds for homicide"."[p.xiii.].
42. ibid, p.138.

narrative of a stable sexual identity within the patriarchal definitions of femininity - that is, within the boundaries of motherhood and domesticity. If the female self has to defend her own identity, one that is formed on her own terms, it is this these insidious traps that she must identify and re-vision.

> There was only one place to get to.
> Simmering, perfumed,
> The paths narrowed into the hollow.
> And the snares almost effaced themselves-
> Zeros, shutting on nothing,
>
> Set close like birth pangs.43.

What lures the female self is the possibility of defining herself through the birth of a child. The "simmering, perfumed" paths, the "hollow" could very well represent what Rose calls "the most recognisable insignia or cliches of femininity itself."44. If the passage leading onto the trap is identified with the birth canal, then the woman like the rabbit is lured without option into a snare. It is the snare of masculine preconceptions that defines motherhood as the ultimate expression of femininity, an experience that unequivocally represents all that is good and beautiful. As Plath's "motherhood" poems written across 1960-'62 show, the female body can itself become a trap to this kind of masculine speculations. Motherhood, as we saw in the previous chapter, could become either an essentialist trap for female sexuality or a resounding statement of

---

43. "The Rabbit Catcher", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.25.
44. The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, op.cit, p.138.

the polyvalent nature of that sexuality - ambivalent, disturbing and powerful in its contradictions.

It is only by the penultimate stanza of the poem that actual gendering takes place. The presence of the male figure within the house, takes on every overtone of menace.

> I felt a still busyness, an intent.
> I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
> Ringing the white china.45.

The female persona seems "ringed" in, her place circumscribed. The male figure seems to delight in "those little deaths"- sexual conquests,46, ideological and linguistic victories that define and codify female sexuality. Importantly, the "deaths" await like "sweethearts". If the success of the chase excites the male, then it must be remembered that its efficient extravagance captivates even as it threatens the female. There seems a sense of reciprocal bonding as the poem moves onto the first direct examination of the relationship of the female persona and the rabbit catcher.

> And we, too, had a relationship-
> Tight wires between us,
> Pegs too deep to uproot, and, a mind like a ring
> Sliding shut on some quick thing
> The constriction killing me also.47.

---

45. "The Rabbit Catcher", op.cit, p.25.
46. Rose points out that the association of death and sex has a "fully accredited literary tradition that runs from William Shakespeare to the surrealism of Georges Bataille". See The Haunting of---, op.cit, p.140.
47. "The Rabbit Catcher", op.cit, p.25.

It is almost as if the fixed parameters of their relationship, their codified positions within culture and ideology are too fixed to be uprooted, even if the female self so desired. Rose points out that in her first draft for "The Rabbit Catcher", Plath had crossed out "his mind" in the last stanza, amending it to "a mind" instead.48. While "his mind" would invite an unambiguous reading of the poem as indicative of the destructive power of the male logos, "a mind" distributes the blame more generally. What constricts, blinds, gags and kills is certainly the exertion of male force and power, not only over the female body but over the mind too. Yet, in part, the woman is to blame for accepting male definitions of language and culture to codify herself. It is this female compliance with patriarchal structures of thought that make the woman a victim, a "vacancy". A line that Plath removed from her draft proves crucial in underpinning this reading:

"The pegs were too deep to move, but I buried the prop sticks".49.

In removing this line, Plath removes any easy, straightforward reading of the poem along the lines of female victimization due to the male abuse of power.

Rose points out that Plath's excisions in her drafts concentrated on downplaying or removing "the personal, the local accusation--- together with the much more direct reference to her lack of power."50. It is

48. The Haunting of---, op.cit, p.141.
49. See The Haunting of---, op.cit, p.142.
50. ibid, p.141.

precisely this "downplaying that is eschewed in poems like "The Jailer", "Daddy", the bee poems, "Lady Lazarus".

In "The Jailer", written on 17 October 1962, the oppressive nature of male domination is much more directly referred to. The female body is again the object of victimization.

> I die with variety-
> Hung, starved, burned, hooked.51.

The assault is explicitly sexual and it is the perversity of this sexual exploit that is emphasised.

> I have been drugged and raped.
> Seven hours knocked out of my right mind
> Into a black sack
> Where I relax, foetus or cat,
> Lever of his wet dreams.---
>
> I spread to the beak of birds.---
>
> He has been burning me with cigarettes,
> Pretending I am a negress with pink paws.
> I am myself. That is not enough.52.

Although the sense of violation is indeed strong in these lines, there is also a strong degree of sentimentality. As we noticed in "The Rabbit Catcher", there is a tendency in Plath's later verse to occasionally use images loosely, piling them all together in search of a certain effect. Notice for example the inequal linking of the words "foetus" and "cat" to represent the self's predicament. What is the significance of this link? Is it to convey the impression that the self under attack is both as helpless

---

51. "The Jailer", Collected Poems, op.cit, p.227.
52. ibid, p.226.

as the foetus or as scratching and vicious as the cat? Yet why should this interpretation hold when the reader can, just as easily, see the "foetus" as something that is protected, safe, and the "cat" as not necessarily vicious. Notice how wildly relative interpretation could become due to the arbitrary swings in image making. Following close on the heels of this unequal concatenation of images, is the objectification of the female self as "the lever" of male sexual fantasies, "his wet dreams". It is this ambivalence that Plath wants to stress, the fact that the woman is both the object and agent of male sexual fantasy. The indiscriminate selection of images however confuse and blur this main issue.

Plath's verse is much stronger when she relates the sudden regression in memory, involving in its wake the melting of roles between the dead father and the terrifying husband/lover, both who have "jailed" and enslaved the female self. The physical cruelty of the husband/lover matches the mental assault that the dead father's absence impresses on his aggrieved daughter.

> I dream of someone else entirely
> And he, for this subversion,
> Hurts me,---
>
> I imagine him
> Impotent as distant thunder,
> In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.53.

The woman is jailed by her own guilt, her wn subversion. As the figures of father, lover, husband merge, she is

---

53. ibid.

trapped in the stranglehold of her own memory, her own fantasies.

> I wish him dead or away.
> That. it seems, is the impossibility.
> That being free.54.

The poem which has employed image after image to emphasise the cruelty of male oppression, ends in another typical flurry.

> ---What would the dark
> Do without fevers to eat?
> What would the light
> Do without eyes to knife, what would he
> Do, do, do without me?55.

It is clear that the invincibility of male domination is a contentious issue and that the female figure is powerful despite her apparent passivity. However it is a point that is clumsily made, with the closing lines sagging under the weight of accumulated alternatives drawn up to stress the interdependence of these opposites - sickness and health; light and darkness; male and female. Even the repetitious "do, do, do" does not carry the tone of dismissal half so effectively as in a poem like "Daddy". In "Daddy" the accusation is more direct- "You do not do, you do not do".56. The negative pointer "not", placed in the centre of two identical phrases balances the line in "Daddy" and locates the blame directly on the word "you". In "The Jailer" however, the effect is more generalized, watered down.

---

54. ibid.
55. ibid.
56. "Daddy", Ariel, op.cit, p.54.

"The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Jailer are not as finely crafted poems as poems like "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" or the bee poems. They do however point out the pitfalls as also the greatest strengths of Plath's late verse. The greatest failing is the straining after effect, the loose jumbling of images. The greatest strength lies in the attempt to manipulate terror and to accept rather than resolve the many ambivalences that follow in the wake of that attempt.

Both "The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Jailer", interestingly enough though part of Plath's own plan for Ariel, have been left out of the 1965 publication. While "The Rabbit Catcher" finds its place in Winter Trees,[1971], "The Jailer" has been omitted altogether. As we shall see in the next chapter, the omission and re-arrangement of Ariel in the published edition of 1965 was indeed significant. Not only does it affect a clearer understanding of the key patterns and images of Plath's powerful bee poems and her final October lyrics of '62, ["Daddy", "Fever 103", "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus"]; it also underlines the power that male censorship exercises over the feminine expression of anger.

QUENCHING THE PHOENIX FIRES

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
I eat men like air.
["Lady Lazarus"- 23-29 Oct.,1962.]1

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.
["Words"- 1 Feb.,1963.]2

Ariel remains Plath's best-known collection, one on which her laurels as a poet have come to rest. Yet many of its most avid readers must have read Ariel without recourse to the Collected Poems which was edited and published by Ted Hughes a full sixteen years later.3. Ariel has therefore been consistently read with little or no awareness that the 1965 version of the text was markedly different from the one that Plath herself originally intended.4. There has been no indication in the subsequent editions of Ariel itself that a selection had been made. In his introduction to the 1981 edition of the Collected Poems, Hughes does point out that "the Ariel eventually published in 1965 was a somewhat different volume from the one that she planned.--- It omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962, and might have omitted one or two more if she had

---

1. Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus", Ariel, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London,1965], p.19.
2. "Words", Ariel, op.cit, p.86.
3. Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems was edited by Ted Hughes and published by Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1981.
4. Collected Poems includes the order that Plath intended for the collection. See Collected Poems, op.cit, p.295.

not already published them herself in magazines- so that by 1965 they were widely known."5.

To what degree then is this "somewhat different" volume of 1965 to be read as a case of wilful literary appropriation? Jacqueline Rose points out that the "more aggressive" poems removed from Ariel [1965], were in large part the ones whose aggression has since been interpreted as directed at Hughes, [notably "The Rabbit Catcher", "The Detective", "The Courage of Shutting Up". "A Secret", "The Jailer", "Stopped Dead", "Amnesiac" and "Purdah"]6. The principle of selection on the basis of the poems published by 1965 is also questionable. For a number of poems that Hughes chose to omit had already appeared in various journals by the end of 1963. "Magi"[New Statesman, Oct.1961.]; "Stopped Dead"[London Magazine,Jan.1963.] "Amnesiac"[The New Yorker,Aug.1963.]; "Purdah"[Poetry, Aug.1963.]; "Lesbos"[The Review, Oct.1963.]; "The Jailer", "Thalidomide", "The Other", "Swarm"[Encounter, Oct.1963.].7

The effect of the editor's hand on the altered version of Ariel is indeed a dramatic one. The inchoate selection interferes both with the structural coherence of the text and with the poet's attempt to create a distinct narrative voice. As Marjorie Perloff points out, Ariel, in the shape Plath intended, was to start

---

5. Collected Poems, op.cit, see Introduction, p.15.
6. See Jacqueline Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, [Virago Press Ltd.,London, 1991.], p.71.
7. ibid. Rose discusses the contradictory nature of Hughes's selection in her notes to Chapter 3, "The Archive". See note:21, p.247.

with the word "love" in "Morning Song" and end with the word "spring" in "Wintering", thus asserting the "rebirth of an isolate female self."8. By ending the volume with the positive, assertive voice of the "bee" poems Ariel could be seen as culminating in the acquisition of a powerful new-found voice of confidence.

Between these two poles- the pole of "Love" for a man that produces babies and the pole of rebirth as an isolate female self, a rebirth that produces the honey of poetry- the narrative of Ariel 1 unfolds.9.

Although Hughes opens Ariel [1965], with the word "love", he ends it with "life", importantly enough a life governed by "fixed stars".10.The determinism that pervades the poems at the end of Ariel [1965], namely, in poems like "Kindness", "Contusion", "Edge" and "Words", disallows the resurgence of the powerful female self within the text and insists instead on the self-defeating nature of such a reclamation. Hughes has arbitrarily grouped together poems that he himself readily agreed belonged to two different periods in Plath's poetic career. Referring to Ariel [1965], Hughes states:

---

8. See Marjorie Perloff, "The Two Ariels: The [Re]Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon", The American Poetry Review, [Nov.- Dec.1984.], pp.10-18. Susan Van Dyne also speaks of Plath's intentions for Ariel in "More Terrible Than She Ever Was": "The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems", introductory essay to Sylvia Plath's ""Stings", Original Drafts of the Poem in Facsimile", reproduced from the Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College, Northampton, 1982, pp.3-12. Reprinted in Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath, edited by Linda W. Wagner, [G.K. Hall & Co., Boston,1984.], pp.154-70.
9."The Two Ariels---", op.cit, p.12.
10. "Words", Ariel, op.cit, p.86.

It incorporated most of the dozen or so poems she had gone on to write in 1963, though she herself, recognizing the different inspiration of these new pieces, regarded them as the beginnings of a third book.11.

The inconsistent selection results in an Ariel in 1965 that reads as a perplexing mixture of moods, tones and images. From the terrifying anger and image of release and flight in the Bee poems, "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", "Getting There", "Fever 103", to the terrible calm of "Contusion", Kindness", "Edge" and "Words". Interspersed between these two poles of power and inertia, are poems even more varied in their content; poems which are deliberations on immortality and transcendence like "Totem", "The Munich Mannequins", "The Paralytic", or those that speak of the tender affections as also the ambivalence of motherhood, "The Night Dances", "Nick and the Candlestick", "You're", "Balloons". Had Plath's own selection been adhered to, Ariel would have read more coherently as an attempt by the female self to first appropriate that which she fears and then find a narrative for the self that can be defined but more importantly defended.

In this chapter, I concentrate on the effects that literary appropriation has had on the body of the Plath text and look at the ways in which such an action has muted the full force of subversion inherent therein. I do not restrict my analysis to the published version of Ariel [1965], but prefer to move freely between the

---

11. Collected Poems, op.cit, Introduction, p.15.

published word and the intentions of Plath's ghost text, Ariel 1.

If read as an interrelated text, the Collected Poems can help divide Ariel [1965] into two distinct periods- the terrifying October lyrics of 1962 and the relatively more quiet lyrics of 1963. The October lyrics of '62, beginning with "The Detective" [1,Oct.'62.] and ending with "Lady Lazarus" [23-29, Oct.'62.] encompass some of the Plath's most acclaimed poems - "Daddy", four of the Bee poems, "Medusa", "Purdah", "Lady Lazarus", "Fever 103", "Ariel" to name some of the most well-known of them. Enormous critical weight rests on these October lyrics of '62, and for many, Plath's entire reputation as a poet must have come to depend on the verve and pluck of these poems, spewed out in such haste and anger during the last six months of the poet's life. Hughes himself presents most of Plath's work in terms of a constant teleological reference to Ariel, as if everything else she ever wrote was either apprentice work leading to the power of Ariel, or mere juvenilia. In his introduction to Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, Hughes writes:

> Reading this collection, it should be remembered that her reputation rests on the poems of the last six months of her life.12.

Again in the Foreword to The Journals:

> Ariel and the associated later poems give us the voice of that [real] self. They are proof that it arrived.

---

12. Sylvia Plath, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London, 1977.]. See Introduction by Ted Hughes, p.13.

All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation.13.

What is this "real" self that Ariel bears witness to? And how has editorial preference restricted the full assertion of this self? Hughes re-arrangement of Ariel has indeed disrupted the performance of the text. By "performance", I refer to the startling emphasis on spectacle in the key October lyrics; the deliberate carnivalesque upheaval of cultural and literary hierarchies; and the purposeful bonding of writer and reader into the dramatic world of actor and spectator.14

"Daddy" is perhaps the most extensively analysed poem in Plath's literary canon. There is much in this poem that can be admired and equally criticised. The poem has

---

13. The Journals of Sylvia Plath, edited by Ted Huches and Frances McCullough, [Ballantine Books, N.York, 1983.], Foreword, p.xiv.

14. The reference is to "Performance theory", a multivalent term that has become very popular in the field of theatre studies. Within the text/performance theory paradigm lies a complex matrix of performative issues: questions of authorial control and directorial choice; the increasingly problematic relationship of text and performance; how language is appropriated and meaning is reified; the importance of gender inscriptions; the audience, the gaze; referentiality in performance; questions about representation; the use of idiolects and carnivalesque non-verbal gestures. For a fuller list see Notes to Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre, [Macmillan, 1988.]; Elaine Aston George Savona, Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance, [Routledge, London and N.York, 1991.]. Other useful texts are Ann Kaplan's Women and Film, [Methuen, N.York,1983]; New French Feminisms, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, [Schocken, N.York, 1981.]; Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1983.]; Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema, [Indiana Univ. Press, 1984.]; Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, [Methuen, London, 1980.]; Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre, edited with introduction by Lynda Hart, [The Univ. of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1989.

been seen as "confessional", [Rosenthal, 1967]15; "personal", [Eileen Aird, 1973]16; and as a "love poem" [Alvarez,1970]17. Plath herself introduced the poem as a constructed fiction, something closer to a manipulative rendering of biography rather than direct confession. In a reading prepared by the B.B.C. radio, Plath gave the poem its ineluctable Freudian twist of obsessive Father-love.

> Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other - she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.18.

If this could be accepted as an accurate re-telling of the poem, then we could trace three moves in the poem whereby the daughter tries to set right the imbalance created by her father's death. The three moves correspond to three ways of "performing" or "acting" within the text.

The first stage is one of nostalgia to enshrine and retain the dead father's image. This involves a regression into the infantile ego where the daughter accepts the patriarchal hierarchical mould of male domination over female submission. Therefore "Daddy" or

---

15. M.L.Rosenthal, The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II, [Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1967.], p.82.
16. Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath: Her life and Work, [Harper & Row, N.York, 1973.], p.78.
17. A.Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, edited by Charles Newman, [Chatto Windus, London, 1970.], p.66.
18. Collected Poems, op.cit, Notes:1962, no:183, p.293.

his substitute "the Husband", is "God" but also "the black shoe", "the swastika", "the panzer man" and "the devil". He is powerful and disturbing yet the daughter/wife wants to get back to him in order to find herself.

> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do.19.

The second stage involves martyrdom and the acceptance of guilt of having "willed" her father to death. The daughter accepts a victim's role of long standing suffering. Pushing her plight onto the horrific scale of historical mass trauma of World War II, she seeks to establish an archetypal pattern of suffering and endurance. Brutality is then expected, but, more disturbingly, welcomed. The father-husband figures merge into a destructive pair. Therefore, along with the thirty year endurance of "the black shoe" [stanza 1], is the guilt of "Daddy I have had to kill you" [stanza 2]. As retribution there is an implicit acceptance of violence - "the boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you."[stanza 10].

The third and final stage signals revolt and the need to avenge the sense of betrayal and loss. The daughter rejects hierarchy and victimization in favour of the revenge motif. She enacts what Plath termed an "awful little allegory" to exorcise the ghost of her dead father. It is a move to free herself from his tyrannical

---

19. "Daddy", Ariel, op.cit, p.55.

stranglehold. The father and the husband, potentially evil and domineering, are reduced to passive victims in this ritual freeing of the self.

It is important to keep in mind that "Daddy" is both dramatic and allegorical, in that its details freely depart from biographical fact. An excessive reliance on biography would only flatten the effect of the verse. The question posed by the poem is a complex one involving the "getting back to" and "getting one's own back at" the object of fear. Like "The Colossus", "Daddy" too projects unresolved conflicts with parental authority as a textual issue. Margaret Homans suggests that "Daddy" can be seen as "a woman's dislocated relation to speech".20. Plath's own preface, quoted earlier, speaks about the difficulty of finding a narrative for the female self unless the fear of the male order is expelled through masterful, allegorical representation.

If we consider "Daddy" as an illustration of the violent, transgressive birth of the female self, then it is imperative to remember that this rebirth is at the level of representation.As such it involves a rebuttal of the patriarch's language and a search for distinctly "female" modes of expression. Daddy's language of male mastery is as foreign to the female self as "German, [stanza 4], as "obscene" as murder, [stanza 6], as meaningless as "gobbledygoo" [stanza 9]. There is no possibility of communication.

---

20. Margaret Homans, Women writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson, [Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1980.], pp.220-221.

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

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich
I could hardly speak.21.

As in "The Colossus", in "Daddy", the element of fantasy is again pressed into service to represent absence, the un-seen; to articulate the un-said. Daddy is represented as the grotesque, monolithic archetype of power.

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.22.

The use of fantasy constitutes an important element in "Daddy" for it is linked directly to the question of defending female desire. As Rosemary Jackson points out, fantasy is "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss."23. The fantastic can operate in two ways to express desire. It can either "tell of" or manifest desire through grotesque images or it can expel desire when this desire becomes a disturbing element threatening cultural order and continuity. This expulsion is expressed through "a sense of pressing out, squeezing,--- getting rid of something by force"- that is, desire can be "expelled through

---

21. "Daddy", Ariel, op.cit, p.54.
22. ibid.
23. Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, [Methuen & Co., London,1981.], p.3.

"having been told of".24. "Daddy" exhibits the movement from the manifestation to the expulsion of the patriarch as an object of female desire. As we witnessed in "The Rabbit Catcher", in the previous chapter, the desire for the male is frighteningly ambivalent in nature. Brutality and love lie in terrifying proximity. From the phallic symbols of power, "the black shoe", "the one grey toe" to the grotesquely comic images of "the bag full of God", the broken "ghastly statue", the images of "Daddy" steadily build up into archetypal representations of tyrannical power. The figure of "Daddy" now assumes the autocratic power of the totalitarian state with the female self as its victim. The victimization is linguistic, cultural and ideological. Daddy is now "not God but a swastika".25.

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew.---
>
> --- O You-
>
> Not God but a swastika
> So black no sky could squeak through.
> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.26.

It is here that Plath's control over the element of fantasy slips. In her eagerness to work out the allegory of paralysis and release to its point of final completion, the poet allows the fantasy to get the better

---

24. ibid, pp.3,4.
25. "Daddy", op.cit, p.55.
26. ibid.

of the control over language and image exhibited up to this point. Plath has been heavily criticised for her easy use of historical material.27. The reference to Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen, lasting symbols of Nazi war crimes, aims at legitimizing the self's private terrors through a process of enlargement. This is a gauche technique, using historical material as mere props. It is aesthetically unsatisfactory in that the cultural memory that the reader and writer share is forced to supply what language and poetic technique do not. The reader remembers in the context of Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen the enormity of the mass extinction of Jews at the hands of the tyrannical Nazi state. It is on to this scale of enormity that the female persona wishes to project her dilemma. Plath's predeliction for bi-polar oppositions- the Jew and the Nazi, God and Devil, Good and Evil, plays too close to the bone here. The female poet/persona writes herself into the position of a "Jew", the victim of patriarchal tyranny. Yet rather than the appropriateness of the comparison, it is the audacity of it that comes to the fore. Rather than universalising

---

27. See Charles Molesworth, The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry, [The Univ. of Missourie Press, Columbia and London, 1979]; Roger Scruton, "Sylvia Plath and the Savage God", in Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage, edited by Linda Wagner, [Routledge Critical Series, London, 1988.]; Alan Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry, [Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1984.]; Joyce Carol Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath", in Sylvia Plath: The Critical Series, edited by Linda Wagner, op.cit. The ongoing debate on whether Plath has been successful or not in her attempts to merge private trauma with symbols of mass terror was discussed in greater detail in the introduction to this thesis.

terror, rather than familiarising it, the female self only writes herself into a position of exhibitionism and melodrama.

The same lapse in technique affects another of Plath's October lyrics, "Getting There", which again envisions the creation and sustenance of an explicitly female identity.

> The terrible brains
> Of Krupp, black muzzles
> Revolving, the sound
> Punching out Absence! like cannon.
> It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other.
> I am dragging my body
> Quietly through the straw of the boxcars.28.

"Russia" is used to loosely denote the sense of distance that the self has to traverse in the journey of self definition. While the sense of labour and difficulty of the task in hand is clearly projected, the reader's associational skills and knowledge of contemporary events is tested. "Krupp" refers to the German family of steel and armaments manufacturers,29 and as such is identified as an agent of violence, abetting the "enemy" in his schemes of mass extermination. The reference can become obscure if the reader and writer do not, at this point share a common, contemporaneous background.

If "Daddy" represents an allegory that the female subject enacts in order to "find" herself, then what, the reader may well ask, is the significance of her equation with a "Jew". Is "Jewishness" meant to correspond to a

---

28. "Getting There", Ariel, op.cit, p.43.
29. Collins Concise Dictionary Plus, [Collins, London and Glasgow, 1989.], p.701.

sense of difference, separateness, even oddity in terms of cultural experience? It is probably meant to be a generic term for one who is persecuted, for one who suffers. Is this to be extended to the predicament of the woman artist struggling for expression within the hierarchies of patriarchal language and ideology? Or is the "Jew" evoked simply to metaphorise the victim in every woman? Using the complex image of Jew and Nazi in a simplistic manner brings in its wake gross sociological generalizations.

> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face,30.

What provides the saving grace in this reductive use of historical material is the element of irony in the poem. The startling assertion "every woman adores a Fascist" can be read as a pointer to the levels of irony operative in the text. With this seemingly masochistic proclamation, the female poet/self ironically examines the issue of her victimization, suggesting that the sufferers choose or at least accommodate themselves to their suffering. Yet the very authority of her proclamation is ironic, since her claim about "every woman" is itself transparently false. The line parodies patriarchal assumptions about feminine subservience, even while stressing how dangerously inviting this fantasy could be for those lured by the trap of masculine ideology.

---

30. "Daddy", op.cit, p.55.

If the oppressive figure of Daddy personifies the male poetic tradition, then the poem examines the difficulty of textualising a self free of masculine conventions. It is this difficulty of finding and defending a narrative for the female self that is of interest in "Daddy". Despite the maladroit use of historical models to aestheticize power, the poem scores in terms of the textual travesties that are introduced in the text through the techniques of parody and mockery. Plath's "Daddy" is written in a direct, conversational tone, sometimes too colloquial in its determination to undercut emotion.

> 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,31.

In keeping with this tone is Plath's description of "Daddy" as a piece of "light verse".32. Almost on the same day Plath wrote to her brother Warren, describing the poem as "gruesome".33. She later read it on B.B.C. radio in a highly ironic, grating tone of voice. The poem's uniqueness derives from its variegated, even if bizarre fusion of the comic and the horrific. Plath's speaker uses melodramatic, self mocking terms to describe her opponent - "so black no sky could squeak through" [stanza 10] and herself - "poor and white" [stanza 1]. There is a tension established in the poem between the

---

31. ibid.
32. A.Alvarez, Beyond all this Fiddle, [Allen Lane-Penguin, London, 1968.], p.56.
33. Letters Home, edited by Aurelia Plath, [Faber & Faber Ltd. London,1976.], p.472.

adult and childlike voices of the speaker. Thus an adult vocabulary of Taroc packs, Viennese beer, the beauties of Tyrol, Aryan ancestry, Meinkampf looks and specific names of concentration camps, juxtapose a more childlike diction of "gobbledygoo", "barely daring to breathe or achoo". The conventionalized descriptions of "beautiful Nauset", or the Tyrolean snowfall, work in rhythm with regressive fantasies of vampires and ritual sacrifices and with childish nursery rhyme repetitions- "you do not do, you do not do"; "war, war, war". Plath's irony cuts both ways. While the speaker's sophisticated, adult voice undercuts her childish voice, reducing its melodrama to comedy, the childish voice cuts through the pretensions of the adult voice, exposing the extremity of suffering behind the mask of erudition.

The female "I" in the poem, initiates a language of her own by first posing and then deposing herself as a passive instrument of the father/husband's desires. She then experiments with a new form of self representation as a rebel in the spectacular ritual of exorcism where the oppressive power of the patriarch is broken.

> There's a stake in your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always *knew* it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.34.

The closing lines afford drama and spectacle - the riot and abandon of the carnival. Yet it is the forceful yoking together of contraries that is more spectacular

---

34. "Daddy", op.cit, p.56.

than the actual ritual of exorcism. Daddy must also be exorcised through language. In his own language, he is "bastardized". It is the father figure that is being ridiculed by being dismissed as irregular, abnormal and inferior.35. The female self has dismantled hierarchical notions of the male figure as God, as leader, as husband and now as father. There have been repeated attempts to eliminate boundaries of the sacred and the profane, private and the public. It is this carnival upheaval of patriarchal hierarchies that the textual travesties of parody, mockery and the use of nursery rhyme achieve. Like the carnival the nursery rhyme mimes and familiarises terror by battering the boundaries of logic and language. As Bakhtin points out in Rabelais and his World, the carnival "was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic"36

It is on this note of dark humour that the poem ends. The ambivalence of the final word "through" is indeed striking. What does "through" signify? Is the speaker finally able to "get through", to communicate with Daddy? If so, within what parameters does she represent herself? Or, is she "finished with" or "through" with her long

---

35. The Collins English Dictionary defines "bastard" in these terms and the verb "to bastardize" as a process which makes inferior, deposes or illegitimizes a concept. See The Collins English Dictionary, II edition, [Collins, London and Glasgow,1986.],p.127.
36. M.M.Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, translated by Helene Iswolsky, [The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1968.], p.39.

invective against patriarchal power? If indeed, then has the speaker exorcised herself of fear and anger? Or has she finally appropriated male power by freeing herself from the dictates of social and linguistic models of patriarchy and does this action imply the hope of revisioning anger into a positive narrative for female identity? The reader is left with all these questions at the end of "Daddy". If a carnivalesque interpretation is adopted, there is no preference given to any one reading over the next. As Bakhtin points out in Rabelais---, the carnival is deeply ambivalent toward power structures, focusing instead on processes of self definition, both individual and cultural.37. In accepting all interpretations as possible, the carnivalesque reader appreciates the close of "Daddy" as a statement about the difficult and ambivalent nature of defining and defending female identity. What interests Bakhtin is the focus in the carnival of intentionally mixing up the hierarchical levels in order "to discover the core of the object's concrete reality--- the real being outside all hierarchical norms and values.38. It is in the bee poems, [discussed in the next chapter] that this ambivalence lies most finely etched and most delicately balanced. In "Daddy", the anger has been checked but not yet quelled sufficiently enough to be used effectively as a transgressive and transformational power as in the bee sequence.

---

37. ibid, pp.403-426.
38. ibid, p.403.

In poems like "Fever 103", "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus", written after "Daddy" during October '62, the first signs of how this anger can be used in a revisionary manner appear. These poems "perform" wonderfully as the self moulds her anger and resentment into a specific, positive idiolect. Nevertheless, as in "Daddy", there are moments when the performance slips in its control to become instances of melodrama and sensationalism. All three poems, written in terse three line verses, envision a rebirth, a release from masculine restrictions. The image of release is one of ascension and of power, prefiguring the potent image of the "upflight of the murderess into the heaven that loves her" ["The Bee Meeting"]39 and the flight of the terrible "red comet over the engine that killed her" ["Stings"]40.

"Fever 103", written on 20, October, 1962, imitates the voice of a delirious speaker "flickering, off, on, off, on"41 in its emphasis on "the sin, the sin."42. In a B.B.C. radio reading, Plath introduced the poem as representing two kinds of fire.

> ---fires of hell which merely agonize, and fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second.43.

Images pile up so ceaselessly that on the first reading of the poem the reader is stifled and confused by

---

39 "The Bee Meeting, Ariel, op.cit, p.61.
40. "Stings", Ariel, op.cit, p.67.
41. "Fever 103", Ariel, op.cit, p.59.

42. ibid, p.58.
43. Collected Poems, op.cit, See Notes:1962, Note no:188, p.293.

the seemingly reckless structure of the poem. It is not a very easy exercise for the reader to flicker "off, on, off, on" in accordance with the speaking voice. Part of the problem for the reader is that the images in the first half of the poem work on a referential scale that is either too narrow or too general. Thus we have the fires of hell represented by characters of Greek mythology, ["fat Cerberus" - stanza 2]; mixed with myths of popular culture, ["Isadora's scarves" - stanza 4]; leading onto the terrible reality of modern warfare, ["Hiroshima ash" - stanza 9]. No doubt this accretion of images succeeds in faithfully representing the rasps of the delirious, fevered mind of the speaker. It does however affect the lyricism of the verse.

The image of Cerberus, the watch-dog at the gates of hell in Greek mythology, is a direct reference to the impending death awaiting the sick and feverish speaker. It is a conventional image, with the word "Cerberus" immediately creating the context between the speaker and reader of a scene of sin, death and damnation. From this image we move on to a second definition of death. Death is seen as a brutal, unfairly sudden force that strangulates the speaker in much the same manner as the scarves did the famous dancer, Isadora Duncan. Notice Plath's choice of image here. It is almost uncanny that it is the spectacular nature of the death and the legendary mythmaking that followed, that prompts the selection. There is however, a certain hollowness about this image although the lines roll of smoothly enough.

Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.44.

Perhaps this sense of cultural vacuity in the image exists because of the proximity that the image of "Isadora's scarves" shares with that of "Hiroshima ash". It could be said, to Plath's advantage, that the phenomenon of death is being presented as both individual and en masse, with an equal associative degree of spectacle and waste attributed to both cases. Yet how can we consider Isadora Duncan's death, untimely as it was, on the same scale of horror with the extermination of hundreds of thousands in the holocaust of Hiroshima? Notice that the reference to Hiroshima is linked specifically to the "bodies of adulterers".

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.45.

It is the guilt of the perpetrators of Hiroshima that is being referred to, a guilt that eats into modern consciousness and is a constant reminder of sin and retribution. This, presumably, is the fate of "adulterers" tortured by their sins. Though the analogy can work, it is still too laboured to be aesthetically satisfactory. Plath is again counting on the knowledge of the reader to provide the meaning here and to thereby excuse the inchoate nature of the image making as the result of the delirium of the speaking voice.

---

44. "Fever 103", op.cit, p.58.
45. ibid.

The second half of the poem, which goes on to describe the moment of flight and supposed release of the self, depicts a greater control over image making. The images are still audacious, even outrageous. The female persona compares herself first to God [stanza 12], and then explicitly to "a pure acetylene Virgin" [stanza 16]. The imagery, imitative of the Ascension of the Virgin Mary with its connotations of radiance and purity, is once again a conventional associative recall. However, in this second half of the poem, the actual physical condition of the speaker is accounted for in a much more co-ordinated manner through the images produced. As image follows image, the flushed and feverish condition of the speaker now becomes a purifying cauldron. The speaker cannot be touched in this state; she asserts that she is inviolate in her purity.

> I am too pure for you or anyone. ---
>
> Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
> All by myself I am a huge camellia
> Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.46.

This is the proclamation of a self that is "infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive."47 Amid the assertions of the powerful images of Gods and acetylene Virgins, there are images of "Japanese paper moons", "golden beaten skin" and "huge camellias":

> My head a moon
> Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
> Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.48.

---

46. ibid, p.59.
47. ibid.
48. ibid.

Literary echoes are unmistakeable here. Yeats's "Byzantium" poems use the image of spectacularly carved sculpture to represent perfection, although it is a purity that is markedly inaccessible, distant and undeniably cold. This leads us to the question at the start of the poem- "Pure? What does it mean?"49. If the second half of the poem describes a purificatory ritual, it forcefully engages the reader in the meaning and impact of this process. The release of the female self is envisioned in terms of a flight "to Paradise" [stanza 18]. In Plath's late poetry, purity and perfection are term that is loaded with ambiguity. Most often it is the foetus that is referred to in terms of the pure, the untainted. In the Ariel poems referring to children, "Nick and the Candlestick", "Morning Song", "The Night Dances" and "You're", the child is regarded as a symbol of purity and innocence, though the symbolism is never unequivocally so. There is always a sense of lurking danger, so that the child continuously functions as a reminder to the mother of the transitory and assailable nature of purity itself. Nevertheless, the female self in search of its own narrative attempts constant regressions into a state of foetal innocence. In "A Birthday Party",[30, Sept.'62.], death is seen as a gift, a birth-day into a newer, purer self.

> There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
> And the knife not carve, but enter
> Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,

49. ibid, p.58.

And the universe slide from my side.50.

In "Getting There" [6, Nov.'62.], impending death is again visualised through womb-tomb imagery. The self is reborn through a cleansing ritual that strips away social and domestic exigencies.

The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.51.

Purity and perfection are not easily interchangeable in Plath's poetic canon. While the term purity carries a sense of progress toward a state of perfection, perfection itself is seen as a state that is static and lifeless. In the poem "Years", [14, Nov.'62], and in the poems that Plath reserved for her new volume of poetry, this state of perfection, attributed to concepts like God and Paradise, is categorically rejected as rigid and uninteresting.

O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.
Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.

What I love is
The piston in motion- ---

And you, great Stasis-
What is so great in that!52.

Perfection equated with Stasis becomes a useless, unattractive state. In "The Munich Mannequins", [28,

50. "A Birthday Present", Ariel, op.cit, p.50.
51. "Getting There", Ariel, op.cit, p.44.
52. "Years", Ariel, op.cit, p.73. Plath herself did not include this poem in her list for Ariel.

Jan.'63], the idiom of barrenness and infertility is pressed into service to denote the disadvantages of the state of perfection.

"Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children."53.

How valid therefore is the flight to Paradise that the reader witnessed at the end of "Fever 103"? Is it to be read as the moment of release of the female self into a space of power or into a vacuous state of immobility? It is here that the arrangement of Ariel plays a crucial part. With Plath's original outline for Ariel, "Fever 103" could be read as a positive statement in the growing narrative of the female self. In terms of composition it leads on to the powerful image of "God's lioness" in "Ariel", [27, Oct.'62.]; to the positive redeployment of anger in "Purdah", [29, Oct.'62.] and finally to the Phoenix-like image of control and power in "Lady Lazarus" [23-29, Oct.'62.]. In terms of Plath's arrangement, the image of breaking free in "Fever 103" would have led on to the transformative and transgressive employment of power in the crucial bee poems that would have closed Ariel. Hughes however, ends the 1965 volume with poems like "Kindness", "Contusion", "Edge" and "Words", poems whose tone of determinism and quiet despair invalidate this "terrible" voice that would otherwise have resonated through Ariel.

---

53. "The Munich Mannequins", Ariel, op.cit, p.74. This poem was intended for the new volume of poetry that Plath planned after Ariel.

In this context of editorial preference over authorial consent, the new-found voice of "Fever 103" could well be relegated to that of uncontrolled hysteria. If so, it is the male gaze that has distorted the image- the woman who creates a spectacle is viewed as "making a spectacle of" herself. The distinction is crucial in the way bold affirmations of feminine performance as against silence, withdrawal and invisibility are accepted as valid parameters for defining female sexuality.

In "Purdah", written on 29, October 1962, the first attempts to smash the referentiality of the male gaze is recorded. The female self as the gleaming "mirror", at first only functions as a reflector of masculine cultural and ideological preconceptions.

> I gleam like a mirror.
>
> At this facet the bridegroom arrives
> Lord of the mirrors!
> It is himself he guides
>
> In among these silk
> Screens, these rustling appurtenances.54.

The female self still occupies the "space off" position that was discussed in Chapter 1 on The Colossus. That is, the female self is still un-seen and un-said outside the masculine frame of reference. She still occupies "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible"55.

---

54. "Purdah", Collected Poems, op.cit, pp.242-243. The poem is not included in Ariel, 1965. Hughes chose to publish it instead in the Winter Trees volume of 1971.
55. Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, [Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987.], p.26.

I am his.
Even in his

Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet 56.

Yet the masculine rationale is seen as inadequately linear for the female self is seen as polyvalent, multiple -

--- I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.57.

A break-out from this constricting patriarchal framework is envisioned explicitly in terms of a movement from silence to articulation;-

I shall unloose
One note

Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day flies

Its crystals
A million ignorants.58.

and from passivity to power.

Notice the emphasis on the word "unloose". There is a sense of forcefully breaking away from oppressive boundaries and hierarchies. The poem closes with the symbolic "murder" of patriarchal ideologies with the oblique reference to the murder of Agamemnon by

---

56. "Purdah", op.cit, p.243.
57. ibid, p.242.
58. ibid, p.243.

Clytemnestra. Electra becomes Clytemnestra as the female self now appropriates male power.

This appropriation itself can be viewed by readers either as an example of positive revision or of negative masquerade. Jacques Lacan has written of feminine sexuality as a masquerade, masking a lack, pretending to hide what is in fact not there.

> I would say that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of desire of the Other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade.59

Luce Irigaray too uses the term "masquerade" to refer to women experiencing desire only as male desire for them.60. If the release at the end of "Purdah" is read as a masquerade, then the female self is still incapacitated; is still unable to define "femaleness" as different from the masculine equation of power and identity. If however, the release is viewed as a revisionary step, then the "unloosing" witnessed in the poem can become the first indication of actual insurgence against patriarchal hierarchies. It becomes the first real act of mimesis in Ariel, an act that is honed to near perfection in "Lady Lazarus" and the bee sequence of October '62.

> To play with mimesis is--- for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It

---

59. Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, edited by Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, [W.W. Norton, N.York, 1982.], p.84.
60. See Luce Irigaray, The Sex Which is Not One, translated by Catherine Porter, [Cornell University Press, N.York, 1985.].

means to resubmit herself- inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible", of "matter"- to "ideas", in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by 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.61.

"Lady Lazarus" written between 23-29, October, 1962; the last of the October lyrics, can be read as a brilliant mimetic attempt to "carnivalise" existing patriarchal distinctions and boundaries in language and culture. The poem attempts to define and defend a narrative for the female self through this act of linguistic debasement. It is almost impossible to ignore the impact that biography had in the composition of "Lady Lazarus". In the aftermath of her separation from Hughes in the summer of '62, there came a period of poetic sterility with as few as six poems being composed from July to September of that year. Then came the frenetic writing spell of October '62, an effort which Plath herself looked upon as an attempt to live through a literary alter ego. In a letter to her mother dated 16, October, '62, Plath claims that she was ready for this re-birth.

To make a new life. I am a writer--- I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life. They will make my name.62.

What makes "Lady Lazarus" a high point in Plath's development as a poet is the way in which biographical details are manipulated and controlled within the dramatic structure of the poem. There are, for example,

61. ibid, p.76.
62. Letters Home, op.cit, p.468.

references to three attempts at suicide as the poet freely departs from biographical fact to fictional enlargement of details. This enlargement is to dramatically legitimize the searing self confidence of "the walking miracle", [stanza 2]; "the smiling woman of thirty" [stanza 7].

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.63.

As Susan Van Dyne points out, " in "Lady Lazarus", she borrowed the miracle of Lazarus, the myth of the phoenix, the hype of the circus, and the horror of the holocaust to prophesy for herself a blazing triumph over her feelings of tawdriness and victimization."64.

In the poem, forms of carnival folk culture coalesce, chiefly that of ritual spectacles which included pageants and marketplace festivities, and the features of comic verbal compositions like parodies, profanations and marketplace speech. These masks and voices of the carnival are incorporated as textual travesties that attempt to resist, exaggerate and thereby destabilize the peripheries that mark and maintain the supremacy of the male gaze. The female persona of the poem is on dis-play and she both plays to and against the preconceptions of her audience.

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

---

63. "Lady Lazarus", Ariel, op.cit, p.17.
64. Susan Van Dyne, "Fueling the Phoenix Fire: The manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"", Massachusetts Review: 24, [Summer,1983.] p.397.

Them unwrap me hand and foot-
The big strip tease.65.

The violent fantasy of the poem represents the wish of the female speaker to incorporate the forces that threaten to destroy her. The naming of antagonists is consistent: lover, captor, enemy, doctor, God, Lucifer. This naming of enemies allows the self to probe the extent of her dependence on these male figures through whom she had previously sought to define herself.

Van Dyne's discussion of Plath's manuscripts for "Lady Lazarus" prove both interesting and informative. She points out that throughout Plath's excisions and additions in her drafts, what is evident is "her fixation on a male figure as the primary audience for her strenuous self-proclamation."66. The manuscripts make it clear that the speaker's re-construction of the self demands and depends on the male audience to validate it.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.67.

As witnessed in earlier poems like "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Daddy", the male figure is both desirous and dangerous - both the frame that represents the female self and that which thwarts representation. For the figure of Lady Lazarus, "the walking miracle" to attain a heroic stature, this desire and fear of the male figure

---

65. "Lady Lazarus", op.cit, p.17.
66. "Fueling the Phoenix Fires"---, op.cit, p.399.
67. "Lady Lazarus", op.cit, p.18.

must be assimilated into the self. It is as if the entire corpus of male hegemony is ingested into the final Phoenix image of the woman who "eat[s] men like air".68. But before this self-confidence is achieved in the poem, there are moments of vulnerability that must be mastered. "Do I terrify?"- the speaker asks the "enemy" [stanza 4], although it is her own terror that is blatantly foregrounded.

> The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
> The sour breath
> Will vanish in a day.
>
> Soon, soon the flesh
> The grave cave ate will be
> At home on me 69

Behind the wry humour and the apparent flippancy of the lines that follow, "and like the cat I have nine times to die." [stanza 7], there is grim terror. This terror is controlled and interiorized through a dramatic reversal of roles between the female speaker and her audience. From strip-tease to relic, to the valuable opus, the persona assaults the audience with her terrifying disclosures.

The first "strip tease" is similar to the market-place festivities of the carnival, the "peanut-crunching crowd" witnessing a spectacle free of charge. The persona presents herself, allows herself to be gazed upon.

> Gentleman, ladies
>
> These are my hands

---

68. ibid, p.19.
69. ibid, p.16.

My knees.70.

By the time we reach the second spectacle, "there is a charge" [stanza 19]. The female self's repeated forays with Death and her "theatrical comeback[s]" give her the status of a legend. Indeed she is as miraculous, rare and expensive to view as the relics of saints.

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

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

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.71.

The macabre humour, together with the intentionally presumptuous analogies, create an abrasive form of presentation. The female self now quotes a price that the audience must pay to see her suffer. Notice how dramatically the balance of power shifts from the audience to the speaker. In the thrill of performance, the speaker now controls and manipulates the gaze of the spectator rather than simply being defined by it. As the self enacts this grotesque drama of arranging and re-arranging her many "selves", she moves towards a defiant departure from archetypal representations of male authority. The female self in charge of her own reconstruction, has no dependence on the "Herr Doktor", even on "Herr God". She has traversed the terrors of hell and still made "the theatrical/ Comeback in broad

---

70. ibid, p.17.
71. ibid, p.18.

daylight."72. So "Herr Enemy" and "Herr Lucifer" can no longer control or define the terms of her victimization. The grim irony of the poem points to a heroine who is both victim and victor. The attempts to create the image of a powerful, autonomous self is successful only in so far as the vulnerable selves, derivative of male logic or rationale are burnt to ashes.

> Ash, ash-
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there-
>
> A cake of soap,
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling.73.

There is a forceful rejection of domestic and marital bonds as the self moves into a space of autonomous power. This is the "unloosing" of "Purdah" at its most comprehensive.

> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.74.

In its oppositional play, the poem depicts the female speaker making a spectacle of her audience. By refusing to surrender to the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, the female speaker suggests a carnivalesque redeployment or counter production of culture, knowledge and pleasure.

Had Plath's own voice been heeded, Ariel [1965] would have read as a successful attempt at re-visioning an explicitly female narrative for the self. Hughes's

72. ibid, pp.17-18.
73. ibid, p.18.
74. ibid, p.19.

editorial hand however, robs the performance of its verve. Masculine logic and linearity reasserts itself on the body of the text.

The Phoenix fires are extinguished-

> The heart shuts,
> The sea slides back,
> The mirrors are sheeted.75.

"God's lioness"76 is stripped of her power-

> Words dry and riderless,
> The indefatigable hoof-taps.
> While
> From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
> Govern a life.77

The hand of the editor has, as we have seen in this chapter, clearly cloven Ariel into two distinct texts. This proscription of the text by indiscriminate editorial intent was indeed a grave miscalculation. The published edition of Ariel in 1965 is certainly a scaled down version, robbed of the spectacle and performative power of the original. Ariel as text grapples within masculine parameters in its quest for acceptance in the literary world at large. Plath intended to close Ariel with the Bee poems, poems that surge with a new-found sense of power and equilibrium. Unless Ariel is read concurrently as it was meant to be and as it is, there is a danger that the triumphant narrative of female identity, expressed in the final poems, would reman forever un-seen and un-said within the prescriptive parameters of masculine discourse.

---

75. "Contusion", Ariel, op.cit, p.84.
76. "Ariel", Ariel, op.cit, p.36.
77. "Words", Ariel, op.cit, p.86.

RE-COVERY AND RELEASE IN SYLVIA PLATH'S "BEE-POEMS", OR *ARIEL* AS IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN

In the previous chapter, we witnessed the manner in which the heavy hand of the editor, robbed Ariel of its inherent music. Plath's original selection was made to seem accessorial, was even unacknowledged, as a "new" text was created in its place. The manner in which the editor usurped the role of the author leads me to ruminate on the most unlikely of comparisons, - an interesting legend in Hindu mythology. A strange myth centres around the most popular of the Indian icons, Lord Shiva, [or Siva] - the Destroyer figure in the Hindu triad. Shiva, is also called "Ardhanariswara"- the androgyne God.[Ardha:half; Nari:woman; Iswara:God]. In him resided "Sakti",- the female power,- a repressed, indiscernible, yet immensely powerful force field. In his capacity as Ardhanariswara, Shiva was called upon to assist in the act of creation. Importantly enough it was the act of creating Woman. Prior to calling upon Shiva's services, Brahma, the Logos, had summoned forth forms through an act of concentration; creating the Word through an act of will. But Brahma's creatures could not procreate. Sakti was therefore called upon to set aright this imbalance.-

> From the middle of her brow she created a sakti equal in glory to herself. Lord Siva, the ocean of mercy, then smilingly asked Sakti to fulfill the desire of Brahma, and she became Sati the daughter of Daksha. [Siva Purana, 3.3. 21-27.]. Then the great GodGoddess, --- re-entered the body of Siva, --- [Siva Purana, 3.3. 28.]. From that time, womankind was created in the world, procreation became sexual, the enjoyment of

pleasure in woman was established, and Brahma was happy." [Siva Purana, 3.3. 29; 7.1.16. 25; 25. 5-29.].[1]

To complete the circularity of the mission, Sati marries Lord Shiva, returns to her Heavenly abode & assumes the newly formed role of wife. The predictable role of passivity, the pre-set language of deference, the damnable status of difference. Woman within familiar parameters. No wonder Brahma was happy. The Word had become the Deed with the Woman as intercessory. But what on earth happened to Shakti? How did the "feminine" come to mean the "accessorial"?

During the course of this chapter, I propose to hypothecate the close of Plath's Ariel, as opposed to Hughes version of it, as a release of a specific narrative for female identity. The re-surfacing of the "feminine" in Plath's poetry is, as we have seen, most often consistently defined by acts of textual transgression and reclamation, transformation and release. I have selected the bee-sequence in Plath's poetry [Ariel, Winter Trees and The Colossus.] as representative of this struggle preceding the definition of the ubiquitious "I".

--- I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?[2]

The word that troubled me on my first reading of Plath's "Stings" was "recover". Recover - regain

1 Stella Kramrisch, The Presence of Siva, [Princeton University Press, 1981.], p.203.
2 "Stings", Ariel, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1965.], p.66.

possession or use of, or take control of; reclaim. But also Re-cover- cover again; conceal; hide. So recover what; why recover; recover from whom/what; how to recover; why and how and from whom/what to re-cover, cover again? The word instantly established a tangible hierarchy. Someone had possession of something; someone had lacked or lost something; and accordingly, the structures of power were fashioned. The obvious deduction was that reclamation, were it to become imperative, would either be an act of stealth or an act of aggression, or alternatively, a complete redeployment of traditional notions of power and passivity. Interestingly enough, the archaic meaning of reclaim is "to make protest".3 Turning back to "Stings", I realised that all three methods were employed by a deft and continuous binding of conceptual contraries. The recovery is of a "self" at the start of the line, a self that is unsexed and therefore neutral in the power game. But by the end of the same line, it is a "queen" to be recovered - not just a female self, but a female self in a position of power. This self is at first seen as "dead", beyond recovery, but immediately afterward as "sleeping", merely unconscious of its potential, merely covered up, -"Where has she been?". The female self must now awaken to redefine her loss, if not retrieve her true position. But will the insurgency be through an assertion of power - "the lion-red body" -, or by

---

3 See The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 7th. edition, [1982.], p.866.

reviewing the concept of powerlessness - the "wings of glass"? And what of the intermixing of the images of the lion and the bee - the big & the small - but not necessarily the superior and the inferior?

With all these questions buzzing around in me, I decided to look at the bee poems as a sequence. The question of identity through language was indeed the matrix of poetic concern in this sequence.The bee poems as text, become the site of linguistic insurgency and in an exemplary fashion, display the interplay between meaning in the manifest letters of the text and the recovery of a subtly different meaning from the repressed rhythms of the sub-text. A woman-text, - a text that recovers from phallogocentric discourse the "jouissance"[4] that it had lost or was forced to repress, - is a return of the repressed feminine in discourse with its

---

4 "Jouissance" was a term that was popularised by French critics such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. In The Pleasure of the Text, [Farrar, Straus and Giroux Inc., N.York, 1975.], Barthes differentiates "pleasure" from "bliss", the former, something that can be expressed, the latter, one that defies representation. Lacan, in Ecrits: A Selection, translated by Alan Sheridan, [Tavistock Publications, London, 1977.], identifies "jouissance" as the totality of enjoyment - i.e. covering the field of law and the activity of sex. In Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, translated by Thomas Gora, Leon Roudiez and Alice Jardine, [Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford, 1982.], Kristeva gives "jouissance" a meaning that is closely related to that given by Lacan. Lacan speaks of "jouissance sexuelle" and "jouissance phallique" but in both cases, the term "jouissance" is gramatically and conceptually qualified. Unlike Lacan, Kristeva distinguishes sensual and sexual pleasure by the term "plaisir", while the term "jouissance is used to connote total joy or ecstasy. Importantly enough the French word "jouissance" when split, implies the presence of meaning - "j'ouis sens" - i.e. "I heard meaning."

energetic, joyful and trangressive flight through language.

Tracing the flight of the queen bee through the bee sequence, I wish to argue that the female subject, in order to justify an identity so at variance with phallogocentric models, adopts a position of defiance and a voice of plurality.

The queen bee alone seems to have been singled out in the conceptual framework of the hive with striking particularity of detail. She is "old",5; a shrewd survivor-"the old queen does not show herself"6; contradictorily, "poor, bare & unqueenly" with wings like "torn shawls",7; and yet more terrible than she ever was-"red scar in the sky" with "wings of glass" and a "lion-red body"8. The other bees are seen as a collective entity in comparison to the singularity of the queen. Meticulously structured, with labour strictly divided, the hive is the political pivot of the bee sequence. The hive is seen as a source of protection and sustenance. If we hypothesize a child-bee analogy, we notice that the conflict between imagined unity and its absence becomes one of the core themes of the bee sequence.9 Like the

---

5 "The Bee Meeting", Ariel, op.cit, p.61.
6 ibid.
7 "Stings", Ariel, op.cit, p.65.
8 ibid.
9 I refer to Jacques Lacan's reading into the nature of personality as an interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomenon. According to Lacan, the pre-linguistic child, when about a year old, observing itself in the mirror, intuits an image of itself as a unified being. As yet weak and dependent, without any distinct personality of its own, there is an inherent discrepancy between the child's belief in an ideal unity and the absence of it. The desire to retrieve this sense of

child, the queen bee must turn to the hive /mother for sustenance and must yet remain an entity separate from this provider. In both the case of the child and the bee, the sense of self sufficiency, is discredited by the vulnerability of the subjects in question. Both the child and the queen bee acquire the exclusivity of the "I" pronoun, only when the presence of the Other is acknowledged. The "Other" - the mother/society for the child and the worker bees for the queen, - plays a crucial role in positioning the subject in the fissure between manifest behaviour and unconscious wishful thinking. The child wishes for an integrated "I", but remains dependent & vulnerable; the queen bee wishes for longevity, but flies with the momentary brilliance of a "red comet"; the worker bees wish for the position of the queen, but remain powerless honey-drudgers. There is hence already a dichotomy at work within the emerging subject.

The mirror-stage in Jacques Lacan's reading into the nature of personality, is the referential text for the child and it provides the child with a cornucopia of

---

wholeness, imagined or otherwise, to recover this frightening lack at the root of being, is now set in motion. From now onward, "desir" and "angoisse", as Lacan terms these oscillatory movements, become crucial factors in identity formation. The child now gains an intrinsic opposite, the critic within, as well as an extrinsic opposite, the Mother, the Father, Society in general, the prosecutor without. The child/self, as yet undefined, is projected into a power structure in which it is forced to confront the contradictory nature of its position in the hierarchy. See Lacan's Ecrits: A Selection, op.cit, and Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, edited by Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, [Macmillan, London, 1982.].

images, all of which are ecstatic affirmations of a sense of wholeness. It is a momentary and momentous belief in the superiority and impregnability of the self - the flight of the queen bee, the "red scar", the "red comet" in the sky, supporting her "lion-red body" on her "wings of glass".

If we establish a text-as-mirror comparison, it is interesting to trace how the initial moment of jouissance is transported into the text. It is arguable that the manifest text, with its dependence on the letter, cannot function on a solely pre-verbal level. The presence of what I would term, "intra-lingual" categories, such as rhythm, intonation, memory and association, onamatopoeia, synaesthetic imagery, lends to the text a power quite outside the letter. Most often in the bee poems, the power of the queen is conveyed through these intralingual devices.

Notice the setting in "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter". The ambiguities of the Oedipal stage, representing an incestuous leaning toward the Father and the inexplicable love-hate relationship with the Mother, is dexterously woven into a garden metaphor. Importantly enough it is a garden on the brink of defloration. Plath's language matches this ambivalence in the garden metaphor. The poem is amazingly synaesthetic in its use of images. The garden is aromatically overpowering with the "musk" of the "great corollas"; visually brimful with the "anthers" nodding their heads in wild numbers; acoustically alive with the presence of the birds; stimulating and

stimulated with the sense of touch as the Rain tree "drips its powders down". Notice the sensuousness of the words themselves. It is " a garden of mouthings", the corollas "dilate", "peeling back their silks"; the girl sets her eye to a "hole mouth" in the ground. These explicit "female" postures are juxtaposed deliberately with phallic symbols - the male "foot", "the beaks of birds", "the Golden Rain Tree". The profusion and the fertility of the feminine principle runs parallel to this aggressive phallic order.

Throughout the poem, the question of power and the place of the woman is worked out as a more or less traditional rendition of male- female opposition, - the female ego as the supplicant, the dominated, envious of the male swagger.

> Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,
> You move among the many breasted hives,
>
> My heart under your foot, sister of stone.[10]

The poem clearly works on the twin concepts of "absence" and "desire" in the quest for identity. The daughter hopes to erase her sense of absence, to recover the power symbol through "parings" with her father. The cross-pollination between birds and bees with flowers and trees runs parallel to the realisation of the persona that she can lay claims to "a queenship no mother can contest".[11] The daughter's bid for a position of power is evinced in explicitly sexual terms. The moment of

---

10 "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter", The Colossus, [Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1967.], p.66.
11 ibid.

sexual union comes with the words "potent as kings/ to father dynasties."[12] As the maestro controls "the many breasted hives", the persona who makes "eye to eye" contact with the queen bee, prepares for a symbolic marriage to power. Simultaneous to the primal surge of power that results in the initial moment of jouissance is the sobering recognition of "le nom du pere"- the law of the father. The law of the father is also the register of society.[13] Hence the immediate juxtaposition of the word "dark" with the word "parings" - the linguistic marker indicating the recognition by the subject of the incest angle of her bid for queenship - "A fruit's that death to taste". Yet, the bid for queenship, too difficult to resist, forces the female persona to delight, almost gloat in her surreptitious act of weaning away the father from the mother.

Father, bridegroom, ---

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.[14]

The female persona seeks to legitimize the relationship with the father ["marriage", "bridegroom"], repressing the horror of incest that threatens to force an acceptance of her true, vulnerable self. What is disturbing about "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter" is that the

---

12 ibid.
13 See Ecrits: A Selection, op.cit. See foot note no:12 and no:66 in Chapter 3, "And then the Body told Her Story", for a detailed discussion on the Symbolic and the Semiotic aspects of the signifying process; the ways in which the Law of the Father conditions the Symbolic and the manner in which the subject is initiated into articulation and the subsequent definition of identity.
14 "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter", The Colossus, op.cit, p.66.

subject of the poem, remains a victim of her repression, unwilling to relinquish the image of the omnipotent Father. The last line to which the poem has led us all along, masterfully combines the many ambivalent expressions of a subject for whom the Law of the Father has never been imbibed or understood. This is a precarious situation for "when this law breaks down, or if it has never been acquired, then the subject may suffer from psychosis".15 There are at least three readings to the last line of the poem - "The queen bee marries the winter of your year."

1. It is the marriage of the subject to a person well past his prime in literal years.

2. It is a marriage that removes the discontent of the father owing to the mother's inferior capacity to satisfy.

3. It is a marriage that promises the return of spring; that promises the female self with a recovery of power by providing access to the phallic signifier.

All three readings hold, but the third, if adopted, allows this poem to be placed at the head of the Bee Sequence, leading right down to "Wintering" where the female bees "taste of spring".16 The entire bee sequence, beginning with "The Bee Meeting" and ending with "Wintering", reads as an analysis of the growth of the

---

15 The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction, edited by Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, [Free Association Press, Great Britain, 1986.], p.131.
16 "Wintering", Ariel, op.cit, p.69.

feminine self from a position of vulnerability to that of power through the agency of language.

The release into signification is, for a female subject, a particularly trying experience. Both Freud's "anatomy is destiny" dictum and Lacan's emphasis on the universal phallic signifier, marginalise the Woman's position in relation to language and expression, by apportioning to the phallus the value of the prime symbol. The Woman has to "find herself" through a language system that is phallocratic & hence inevitably repressive. To gain a space of her own, the female subject/persona has to re-work the Oedipal ritual of castration, which has effectively dubbed Women as eternally longing and lacking but never expressing! Julia Kristeva, in her re-reading of Lacan, has highlighted the importance of the transgressive signifier in discourse which undercuts the fixed nature of the Logos by introducing the pre-verbal rhythm of the semiotic. The division of signifier and signified, originates in what Kristeva terms the "thetic" stage.

> --- the semiotic which precedes it[ie. the thetic.], constantly tears it open, and this *transgression* brings about all the *transformations* of the signifying practice that we call "creation".---This is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an iruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, --- [italics my own.]17

In the bee poems, Plath evolves a uniquely female idiom by resorting to transgressive and transformational methods. Existing power structures are thereby

---

17 Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, translated by Margaret Waller, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1984.], p.62.

systematically demeaned by a conscious re-viewing of traditional notions of power and passivity. What is interesting about the entire bee sequence is the ambivalence that Plath attributes to the key questions of passivity and freedom in relation to the female self. These concepts are analysed in concordance with the position that the female self adopts in order to express a reality quite at odds with existing ideological superstructures, whether in language or in society. There is a gradual pattern of emergence in the bee sequence with the queen bee as the Lady Lazarus figure. Notice that in "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter" the queen bee is hidden, literally screened from view, in her hideout beneath the earth- "the hole-mouth". In "The Bee-Meeting", she is tucked away in the farthest recesses of the hive. "Stings" begins with the question if there is "any queen at all" and ends in the first real emergence of the queen, the terrible "red scar", "red comet". In each individual poem, the position of the queen bee corresponds to that of the emergent I-speaker in various positions on the power/powerlessness tangent. It is, strangely enough, the powerlessness of the queen bee in the initial poems of the sequence that contributes to the final image of controlled flight in the poem "Wintering".

In the Bee poems, the female self adopts a position of functional alterity. The chief motif of this alterity is to introduce a difference of perspective. The ability of this position to signal difference, reversal, transformation and change of traditional

notions, is facilitated through an acknowledgement of the carnival element in discourse. By "carnival" I refer [as previously] to Mikhail Bakhtin's use of the term, the "joyful relativity" of which projects a unique subversive element into discourse. The carnivalistic mode is "to some extent life turned inside out, the reverse side of the world --- gesture & discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate."[18]

If "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter" revealed an unwillingness to challenge hierarchies, "The Bee-Meeting" introduces the first note of dissent, by attacking the corruptive nature of institutionalised power. The manifest text, i.e. the visible linguistic structure of the poem, describes the supposed chase, where the villagers try to replace the queen bee by the virgin. "The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen."[19] The repressed text, represents the controlled re-surfacing of the semiotic, where through rhythm and associations, the custodians of power are subjected to a carnivalesque devaluation of hierarchy. This leads to a questioning of an entire gamut of constraints - apparel, role-oriented positions, socially acceptable behaviour and, most importantly, language and communication. The poet/persona is as "nude as a chicken neck" awaiting

---

18 M.M.Bakhtin, The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, [Manchester University Press, 1984.], pp.122-123.
19 "The Bee-Meeting", Ariel, op.cit, p.61.

slaughter as the queen bee, the quarry of the chase that she witnesses. In opposition, in a position of awesome power, are the "agents for the bees", the midwife, the rector, the sexton, - who correspond to three pivotal experiences in life, birth, marriage and death respectively, - and the secretary of the bees who exemplifies the efficient though rather automation nature of the social order. As against the institutional grandeur of these traditional figures of power stands the native cunning of the queen bee- "She is very clever/ She is old, old, old, she must live another year & she/ knows it."[20] For the poet/persona, retention of identity becomes a process of survival. In what seems almost like an initiation rite, the persona dons her protective apparel and the objective behind the ritual becomes clear- "they are making me/ one of them".

> Yes, here is the secretary of the bees with her white shop smock,
> Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees. ---
>
> Now they are giving me a fashionable straw Italian hat
> And a black veil that moulds to my face, they are making me one of them.[21]

In both "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter" and "The Bee-Meeting", the conformist ideal, however deadening it may be, is given precedence over the revolutionary one. Symbolic ousters are envisaged but never really carried through.

---

20 ibid, p.61.
21 ibid, p.60.

In order to enforce an effective coup, the bee poems beginning with "The Arrival of the Bee Box" and ending with "Swarm", enact two of the main acts of the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival:

1. The mock crowning and de-crowning of the king

2. The enforcement of the carnival as a means of social protest, expressing the "haetera" side of existence.

In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", identity is as yet linked with the traditional notions of power read as "domination". The I-speaker, voiceless and almost depersonalised in "The Bee-Meeting", is now apparently in control- "I ordered this, this clean wood box---/ They can be sent back./ They can die, I need feed them nothing. I am the owner."[22] The female speaker's triumph is ironically through inactivity. The speaker's action in the poem ends with the ordering of the bee box, for thenceforth it is the drudges, who rather mechanically, collect the honey. The female persona merely becomes a curious onlooker, assuming an omnipotence completely delusory.- "I am the owner,"---"I will be sweet God, I will set them free."[23] The delusion is sustained only so long as the box provides the comforting protective barriers between the "Roman mob" and the single "I". It is therefore a decrowning of accepted concepts that first opens the discussion of the iconoclastic position that the female self adopts. The female subject of the poem

---

22 "The Arrival of the Bee-Box", Ariel, op.cit, pp.63-64.
23 ibid.

in "The Arrival of the Bee-Box" filled with a crowning sense of ownwership and domination, is contradictorily passive. The iconoclastic position that the female self adopts, like the carnivalesque mode, is a triumphant assimilation of contraries. This sense of "carnivalistic mesalliances" - to use Bakhtin's term, - gives to the bee sequence the transgressive signifier. In order to comprehend the redeployment of notions, the shock value effect of this transgressive signifier is consistently employed. The ritual of crowning and decrowning is an ambivalent one expressing the "inevitability of the shifting and renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure."[24] The importance of this ritual as also its ambivalence is imbibed by the bee sequence. As examples stand, the ambiguous crowning of the father and his daughter with the subsequent decrowning of the mother ["The Bee-Keeper's Daughter"]; the rites to decrown the queen and crown "the virgins"["The Bee-Meeting"]; the crowning sense of ownership ["The Arrival of the Bee-Box"]; the show of strength of the crowned queen/ self ["Stings"]; the passivity and greater power of the "royal lady"/self ["Wintering"]; the mocking dethroning of presumptions ["The Swarm"]. It is on every occasion, the mocking decrowning of certainties, of accepted social norms, of traditional preconceptions.

In "Stings", we find the first exposition of the iconoclastic position, both for the female persona and her doppelganger, the queen bee. The confrontation with

---

24 The Problems of ---, op.cit, p.124.

"the brood cells, grey as the fossils of shells",[25] prompts the female speaker into poignant self questioning into the metaphysics of being- "Is there any queen at all?"[26] It is at first an image of a defeated self, a dethroned queen divested of her power-

> If there is, she is old
> Her wings torn shawls, her long body
> Rubbed of its plush-
> Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.[27]

There is a quick shift to the imagined role of a worker as the female speaker seeks to identify herself with the worker drudges - "winged, unmiraculous women" who "scurry" in their mechanical fashion ignoring a life of the mind. Attempting to unquestioningly suspend herself in the domestic world of deadpan routine, the female speaker realises, all too soon, her dissatisfaction and her difference-

> I am no drudge
> Though for years I have eaten dust
> And dried plates with my dense hair.[28]

Like the female speaker, the worker drudges are deceived by the interloper, the "man with the white smiles", in their unconscious activity of searching for honey. In order to gain an identity of sorts, the queen/ female speaker will have to discard the social niceties of behaviour and step beyond. The final image of the "recovered", resurrected queen is a triumph of contradictions. Assuming a new position of power, the queen bee is now -

---

25 "Stings", Ariel, op.cit, p.65.
26 ibid.
27 ibid, p.67.
28 ibid, p.65.

--- flying
More than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her-
The mausoleum, the wax house.[29]

The potency of the sting is ambiguous because with the sting comes death. Notice also the mausoleum-house analogy where protective structures are devalued as being as insubstantial as wax. The position that the female self assumes is therefore a conflicting one in that it meshes together vital contradictions . By juxtaposing the release of personality with the knowledge of death, the concept of death itself becomes a peculiar sort of affirmation. To view death as a life force is a boldly heterodoxical gesture, carnivalist in its dismantling of accepted notions. From the "vantage point of noncarnival --- [this] becomes, eccentric and inappropriate."[30] The iconoclastic position that the female self adopts, and the subsequent use of the transgressive signifier in discourse, are positions of eccentricity, and of protest, permitting the release of what Bakhtin termed, "the haetera side" the latent side of existence to reveal and express itself. The bee sequence pays heed to this call for eccentricity, for difference and for defiance.

After the queen's ambivalent triumphal flight in "Stings", there is a sense of exhaustion and hibernation in "Wintering". The "maids" and "the long royal lady" are seen as self determining and fearless, having got "rid of the men/ the blunt, clumsy stumblers, the

---

29 ibid, p.67.
30 The Problems of ---, op.cit, p.123.

boors".[31] The female speaker is aware that even the iconoclastic position, the bizarre defiance of conventions, the absurd belief in the superiority of being different, is not ultimately anything more than a assimilation of contradictions- "Decay./ Possession./ It is they who own me."[32] To the female speaker, these forces, like death, like jouissance, are beyond comprehension. Survival is therefore always a matter of hope, the eternal question mark-

> Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
> Succeed in banking their fires
> To enter another year? [33]

The de-glamourization of power continues in "The Swarm", this time using a historical example. It is the absurdity of Napoleon's megalomania that forms the background for the poem. The metaphor of war, sounded by the ominous if absurd words "Pom! Pom!", conveys a sense of hollowness to the traditional ideas of power, conquest, victory and submission. The Napoleon-bee analogy is meant to deconstruct the valorization of power. The swarm, like the army, believes in the absolute sting of attack. The vaingloriousness of the attempt however, eludes both parties.

> So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder.
>
> It thinks they are the voice of God[34]

To the female speaker, this is a historical precedent in the nature of a warning that the iconoclastic

---

31 "Wintering", Ariel, op.cit, p.69.
32 ibid.
33 ibid.
34 The Swarm", Winter Trees, op.cit, p.37.

position, if mistaken for a license to overreach, would only result in the subject's extinction. In "The Swarm", all delusions of physical and imaginary control are cancelled out by Plath's mockery- "O Europe! O ton of honey!"[35] Within the microcosm of the apiary, a new definition for female selfdom is forged - triumphant in as much as it tolerates contradictions, and self-sufficient when it functions as an assimilative re-source.

It is the gap in signification/comprehension that Plath exploits as her poetic medium. The Plathian reader has to therefore correspondingly comprehend the fissure between the poetic idea and the adventurous execution of it. It is this dwelling in possibility, this acceptance of ambivalences that creates the textual space between the writer and reader. Assuming the iconoclastic position of power the female self, as analysed in the Bee poems, remains in a repressed position unless adequate expression and subsequent sublimation is found through the agency of language. The reader therefore plays a crucial role in validating this position. Like the mirror stage of imaginative order, the relationship between the writer and the reader depicts a delusory control over meaning. Moving from the immobility of "The Bee-Keeper's Daughter" to the terrible flight of "Stings", the reader has to occupy a position on the fringe between the manifest and the unconscious text. In order to respond to the iconoclastic position of the

---

35 ibid.

writer, the reader is offered the carnivalesque crown - a position which like the carnival absolutizes nothing. The crowning glory ultimately lies in the shifting nature of meaning itself. The "joyful relativity" of meaning brings in the sense of empathy in that the reader, originally sceptical of the intention of the bee poems to project death as a life-force, now begins to accept ambivalences as the nearest definition of truth. The accessorial aspects of language - the music of the text - is its sakti. No matter how heavy the editor's hand, this life-force, integral to the text, will shine through. For without sakti, how could Shiva smile; how could Brahma be happy?

CONCLUSION

In analysing the innovative strategies employed by Sylvia Plath to define and defend a "feminine" narrative, I seek, by extension, to construct an intertextual overview in which many different women writers may find a legitimate place. Women writers are, in increasing numbers, using various subversive techniques to call into question the relevance and adequacy of patriarchal logic. The reconstruction of women's stories involves fundamental shifts in perspective and a break with traditional patterns of mirroring and projecting women's experiences.

Jacques Lacan's analyses on the formation of the self was initially hailed as a breakaway from Freud's deterministic "anatomy is destiny" given. Lacan's re-reading of Freud provided an unfixed, non-biological, "feminine" position to both males, and in a qualified way, to females. However, there has since been considerable disquiet, especially in feminist camps, regarding the use of Lacanian theory to analyse women's writing. This is chiefly due to the fact that Lacan's theories on the nature of language acquisition and the formation of the self are pointedly phallogocentric in approach. As critics like Teresa Brennan point out,

Lacan's account of femininity "still implicates biology" in that femininity which exists as "the negative term in sexual difference is constructed in relation to the phallus".1. Woman is hence seen as the negative expression in a language structure that is based on acknowledging the omnipotence of the phallic signifier. Lacan's theory of language purports that language is primarily symbolic with the phallic signifier and the Law of the Father playing crucial roles in generating this structure. By apportioning to the phallus the value of the prime symbol, Lacan effectively marginalises the Woman's position in relation to language and expression. If women exist in language only as constructs of male desire, the mirroring process and the projection of women's experiences become arbitrary and falsified reflections. Unless certain subversive techniques are adopted to reverse this pattern of appropriating Women's identity, women would be permanently relegated to the peripherals of discourse. Women would remain like Luce Irigaray's Alice, trapped behind the screen of representation -

> I'm stuck, paralysed by all these images, words, fantasies. Frozen. Transfixed, including by their admiration, their praises, what they call their "love". --- You've heard them dividing me up, in their own best interests. So either I don't have any "self", or else I have a multitude of "selves" appropriated by them, for them, according to their need or desires.2.

---

1 Teresa Brennan, ed., Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, [Routledge, London, 1989.], p.7.
2 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, trans.

Writers like Irigaray and Kristeva point out that Lacan, like Freud before him, inadequately theorises the importance of the primal relationship between mothers and daughters. Both writers insist that it is the recognition of this primeval bonding that allow women to "find" themselves and subsequently articulate their positions within discourse. Kristeva points out in About Chinese Women that in a society that is largely patrilineal, female specificity is often misunderstood or maligned. In Revolution in Poetic Language, Kristeva states that Women can discover themselves within discourse only through a concerted effort to get back through their own bodies to the body of the Mother, the first recipient of the child's every demand.

In Plath's poems on pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, we noticed a deliberate effort to foreground the female body as an articulable medium. This effort brought in its wake a tremendous sense of release, a struggle to find words for that which hitherto could not or dare not be said, to seek expression for thwarted desire and suppressed rage, previously unacknowledged. In Plath's poetry, this bold task of reconstituting a separate, feminine narrative involved both reminiscence and retrieval - a total biographical, biological and cultural recall. In the key lyrics of October 1962, a

---

Catherine Porter, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.York, 1985.], pp. 10, 17.

conscious carnivalesque upheaval of cultural and literary hierarchies was achieved, accompanied as it was by the purposeful heralding of a resonant "new" voice. However, as pointed out in Chapters 6 and 7, this triumphant re-inscription of the female body and the successful redeployment of culture, knowledge and pleasure was vitiated by the imposition of the editor's hand on the body of the Plathian text. This leads us to an important question confronting the future of women's writing and the re-telling of women's stories. How politically pertinent and disturbingly articulate can women's representations be if this movement into a different cognitive spatial reality is framed or curbed by male controlled logic and linearity? The problem of editorial preference maiming Plath's poetic corpus is a disturbing reminder of how easy it is for women's writing to slide back to the inglorious position of the un-seen and the un-said within discourse. If women's writing is continually invalidated by arbitrary editorial selection; is deliberately analysed by the rigid parameters of patriarchal logic, then how successful can such writing be in propelling the feminine from peripheral to mainstream discourse? How far will texts by women play a creative role in constructing a new set of codes that will affirm women in their social, political, historical and material relation to others?

Despite these innumerable questions, the need for a

re-visionary telling of women's stories through a search for a non-phallic, articulable sexuality cannot be over emphasised. In this thesis, I have suggested that through various subversive techniques, women writers can mediate the crucial bonding between mothers and daughters in representation and thus find an-other place of differentiation within discourse. In the woman writer, other women see a vehicle for change, a voice that assumes the responsibility of highlighting the damage of inadequate/incorrect codification of themselves in the dominant culture. A recognition of inadequacy will alert the need for change that involves the unfixing of stereotypic hierarchies and a reorganisation of traditional myths and definitions of patriarchal cultures. As the analysis of Plath's poetry indicates, such a reversal of stereotypes would foreground difficult and often disturbing experiences, feelings of dislocation and abandonment, isolation and fear, rejection and neurosis. In order to contain and streamline these disturbing revelations into a coherent comment on female subjectivity, the woman writer must supplement the process of dismantling hierarchies with the simultaneous building of new ideologies. This reconstruction must necessarily begin with the full acknowledgment of the power of the female body.The re-inscription of women in discourse also entails a re-arrangement of roles that women play - as daughters, as lovers, as mothers, as

friends - without deference to what patriarchal norms may *expect* them as women to feel. For the task of revision to be effective, the critic and reader must also partake in this venture. For the critic and reader this involves a readiness to accept an alternative method of symbolisation, a non-patriarchic symbolic as the critical yardstick for analysing women's writing. This co-operative venture of constructing a new symbolic will allow for substantial repositioning of the Woman within discourse, thereby encouraging the weaving of new and exciting feminine narratives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY TEXTS:

Plath, Sylvia, The Colossus, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1967 edition.]

Crossing the Water, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London,1971.]

Winter Trees, [Faber and Faber, Ltd., London, 1971.]

Ariel, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1965.]

The Bell Jar, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1966 edition.]

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1979 edition.]

Letters Home, edited by Aurelia Plath, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1976.]

The Journals of Sylvia Plath, edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, [Ballantine Books, N.York, 1982.]

Collected Poems, edited by Ted Hughes, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1981.]

SECONDARY SOURCES:

ARTICLES:

Aldrich, Elizabeth, "Sylvia Plath's "The Eye-mote": An Analysis", Harvard Advocate, 101, [May, 1967.], pp.4-7.

Alvarez, A., "Sylvia Plath: The Cambridge Collection", Cambridge Review, 90, [7, February, 1969.], pp.246-47.

--"-- , "The Poet and the Poetess", The Observer, [18, December,1960.]

--"-- , "Sylvia Plath", The Review, no:9, [9, October, 1963.]

--"-- , "Poetry in Extremis", The Observer, [12, March, 1965.]

--"-- , "Beyond all this Fiddle", The Times Literary Supplement, Thursday, 23, March, 1967.]

--"-- , "American Afterthoughts", Encounter, [June, 1965.].

--"-- , "A Poet's Epitaph", The Observer, [17, February, 1963.].

Ashford, Deborah, "Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Complex of Irreconciliable Antagonisms", Concerning Poetry, Vol:7, no:1, [Spring, 1974.], pp.62-69.

Auerbach, Nina, "Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance", Women and Literature, 9, [Spring, 1978.], pp.3-5.

Bagg, Robert, "The Rise of Lady Lazarus", Mosaic, 2, [Summer, 1969.], pp.9-36.

Balitas, V.D., "On Becoming a Witch: A Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Witch Burning" ", Studies in the Humanities, 4, [February, 1975.], pp.27-30.

Baillif, Gene, "Facing the Worst: A View from Minerva's Buckler", Parnassus: Poetry in Review, [Fall/Winter, 1976.], pp.231-59.

Baro, Gene, "Review of Ariel", New York Times Book Review, [26, June, 1966.], pp.10-11.

Bere, Carol, "Review of Letters Home", Ariel, 8:4, [1977.], pp.99-103.

Berg, Elizabeth, "The Third Woman", Diacritics, 12, [Summer, 1982.], pp.11-20

Berman, J., "Sylvia Plath and the Art of Dying: Sylvia Plath [1932-1963]", University of Hartford Studies in Literature, 10, [1978.], pp.137-55.

Bersani, Leo, "The Subject of Power", Diacritics, 12, [Summer, 1982.], pp.2-21.

Birje-Patil, J., "The Autobiography of a Fever: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Indian Journal of American Studies, 5: 1-2, [1976.], pp.10-20.

Blodgett, E.D., "Sylvia Plath: Another View", Modern Poetry Studies, 2, [1971.], pp.97-106.

Booth, Wayne, "Freedom of Interpretation - Bakhtin and the challenge of Feminist Criticism", Critical Inquiry, 9, [Fall, 1982.], pp.45-76.

Brink, Andrew, "Sylvia Plath and the Art of Redemption", Alphabet, 15, [December, 1968.], pp.48-69.

Broe, Mary Lynn, "Demythologizing Sivvy: that "theatrical comeback in broad daylight."", Poet and Critic, 10:1, [1977.]

--"-- , " "Oh Dad, Poor Dad": Sylvia Plath's Comic Exorcism", Notes on Contemporary Literature, 9:4, [1979.], pp.2-4.

--"-- , "Review of Letters Home", Journal of Modern Literature, 5:4, [1976.], pp.787-89.

Buell, Fredrick, "Sylvia Plath's Traditionalism", Boundary, 2, [Fall, 1976.], pp.195-211.

Burnham, R.E., "Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" ", Contemporary Poetry, 1:2, [1973.], pp.42-46.

Caraher, Brian, "The Problematic of Body and Language in Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" ", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], pp.76-89.

Cixous, Helene, "Castration or Decapitation", translated by Annette Kuhn, Signs, [Autumn, 1981.], pp.41-55.

Claire, William F., "That Rare, Random Descent: The Poetry and Pathos of Sylvia Plath", Antioch Review, [Winter, 1966.], pp.552-60.

Cooley, Peter, "Autism, Auto-eroticism, auto-da-fe: The tragic Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Hollins Critic, 10, [February, 1973.], pp.1-15.

Corrigan, S.R., "Sylvia Plath: A New Feminist Approach", Aphra, 1, [Spring, 1970.], pp.16-23.

Cunningham, Stuart, "Bibliography: Sylvia Plath", Hecate, 1, [July, 1975.], pp.95-112.

Davis, Robin R., "The Honey Machine: Imagery Patterns in Ariel", New Laurel Review, 1, [Spring, 1972.].

--"-- , "Now I have Lost Myself: A Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" ", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], pp.97-104.

Davis, Stuart A., "The Documentary Sublime: The Posthumous Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Harvard Advocate, 101, [May, 1967.], pp.8-12.

Davis, William V., "Sylvia Plath's "Ariel" ", Modern Poetry Studies, 3, [1972.], pp.176-184.

Davison, Peter, "Three Visionary Poets", Atlantic, 229, [February, 1972.], pp.104-7.

Dickey, William, "Responsibilities", Kenyon Review, 24, [August, 1962.], pp.756-64.

Dickinson, Peter, "Some Poets", Punch, 239, [7, December, 1960.], p.829.

Diehl, Joanne F., "Come Slowly-Eden: An Exploration of Women Poets and their Muses", Signs, 3, [Spring, 1978.], pp.572-87.

Dobbs, Jeannine, " "Viciousness in the Kitchen": Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry", Modern Language Studies, 7:2, [Fall, 1977.], pp.11-25.

Donald, Davie, "The Peculiar Modern Limits of Sincerity and Confession: Sincerity and Poetry", The Michigan Quarterly Review, Vol:5, [1966.], pp.3-8.

Donovan, Josephine, "Sexual Politics in Sylvia Plath's Short Stories", Minnesota Review, 4, [Spring/Summer, 1973.], pp.150-57.

Doran, Rachel S., "Female - or Feminist: The Tension of Duality in Sylvia Plath", Transition, 1:2, [1977-1978.], pp.14-20.

DuPleiss, R.B., "Washing Blood", Feminist Studies, 4, [June, 1978.], pp.1-12.

Dyroff, Jan M., "Sylvia Plath: Perceptions in Crossing the Water", Art and Literature Review, 1, pp.49-50.

Effron, Arthur, "Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" and Literary Criticism", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], p.69.

--"-- , " "Tulips": Text and Assumptions", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], pp.110-22.

Ehrenpreis, Irvin, "The Other Sylvia Plath", New York Review of Books, Vol:xxix, no:1, [4, February, 1982.], pp.22-24.

Enzenberger, H.M., "In Search of the Lost Language", Encounter, [September, 1963.], pp.44-51.

Eriksson, P.D., "Some Thoughts on Sylvia Plath", Unisa English Studies, 10, [1972.], pp.45-52.

Farewell, M.R., "Feminist Criticism and the concept of the Poetic Persona, Bucknell Review, 24, [Spring, 1978.], pp.139-56.

Feldman, Irving, "The Religion of One", Book Week, [19, June, 1966.], p.3.

Felman, Shoshana, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy", Diacritics, 5, [Winter, 1975.], pp.2-10.

--"-- , "Rereading Femininity", Yale French Studies, no:62, [1981.], pp.19-44.

Ferrier, Carole, "The Beekeeper and the Queen Bee", Refractory Girl, [Spring, 1973.], pp.31-36.

Flax, Jane, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism", Feminist Studies, 4, [June, 1978.], pp.171-91.

Furman, Nelly, "The Study of Women and Language", Comment on Vol:3, no:3, Signs, 4, [Fall,1978.]

Fuss, Diana, "Reading like a Feminist", Differences, Vol:1, [Summer, 1989.], pp.77-92.

Fraser, G.S., "A Hard Nut to Crack from Sylvia Plath", Contemporary Poetry, 1, [Spring, 1973.], pp.1-12.

Gallop, Jane, "Beyond the jouissance principle", Representations, 7, [1984.], pp.110-115.

--"-- , "The Ghost of Lacan, the Trace of Language", Diacritics, 5, [Winter, 1975.], pp.18-24.

--"-- , "The Seduction of an Analogy", Diacritics, 9, [Spring, 1979.], pp.46-51.

Gonzales, Lawrence, "Sylvia Plath, Crossing Over", Chicago Daily News, [9-10, October, 1971.], p.12.

Gubar, Susan, "Mother, Maiden, and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth", Women's Studies, 6, [1979.], pp.301-15.

Guttenberg, Barrett, "Sylvia Plath, Myth and "The Hanging Man" ", Contemporary Poetry, 3, [1977.], pp.17-23.

Hakeem, A., "Sylvia Plath's "Elm" and Munch's "The Scream" ", English Studies, 55, [December, 1974.], pp.531-37.

Hall, Donald, "Knock, Knock", The American Poetry Review, [May/June, 1974.], p.22.

Hamilton, Ian, "Sylvia Plath", The London Magazine, Vol:3, no:4, [July, 1963.], pp.54-56.

Hardwick, Elizabeth, "Review of Crossing the Water and The Bell Jar", The New York Review of Books, 17, 3, [12, August, 1971.], pp.5-6.

Herman, Judith B., "Plath's "Daddy" and the Myth of Tereus and Philomela", Notes on Contemporary Literature, 7:1, [1977.], pp.9-10.

--"-- , "Reflections on a Kitchen Table: A Note on Sylvia Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" ", Notes on Contemporary Literature, 7:5, [1977.], p.5.

Higgins, Judith, "Sylvia Plath's Growing Popularity with College Students", University: A Princeton Quarterly, 58, 4-8, [Fall, 1973.], pp.28-33.

Himelick, Raymond, "Notes on the Care and Feeding of Nightmares: Burton, Erasmus and Sylvia Plath", Western Humanities Review, 28, [Autumn, 1974.], pp.313-26.

Hirsch, Marianne, "Mothers and Daughters", Signs, [Autumn, 1981.], pp.200-22.

Holbrook, David, "The 200-inch distorting mirror", New Society, continued as New Statesman Society, [11, July, 1968.]

--"-- , "Out of the Ash: Different Views of the "Death Camp" - Sylvia Plath, Al Alvarez, and Viktor Frankl", The Human World, 5, [November, 1971.], pp.22-39.

Howe, Irving, "Sylvia Plath: a Partial Disagreement", Harper's Magazine, [January, 1972.], pp.88-91.

Howes, Victor, " "I am silver and exact" ", Christian Science Monitor, 30, [September, 1971.], p.8.

--"-- , "Sometimes, A Walker of Air", Christian Science Monitor, 4, [October, 1972.], p.11.

Hoyle, J.F., "Sylvia Plath: A Poetry of Suicidal Mania", Literature and Psychology, 18, [1968.], pp.187-203.

Hughes, Ted, "Sylvia Plath", Poetry Book Society Bulletin, 44, [February, 1965.].

--"-- , "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's poems", Tri-Quarterly, no:7, [Fall, 1966, Womanly Issue.]

--"-- , "Winter Trees", Poetry Book Society Bulletin, 70, [Autumn, 1971.].

Irigaray, Luce, "Equal to Whom", Differences, Vol:1, [Summer, 1989.], pp.59-76.

--"-- , "And the One doesn't stir without the Other", translated by Helene Vivienne Wenzel, Signs, [Autumn, 1981.], pp.60-67.

Jacobus, Mary, "Is there a Woman in this Text?", New Literary History, 14, [Fall, 1982.], pp.117-41.

Jaffe, Dan, "An All American Muse", Saturday Review, 49, [15, October, 1966.], pp.29-30.

Jardine, Alice, "Theories of the Feminine: Kristeva", Enclitic, 4, [1980.], pp.5-16.

--"-- , "Gynesis", Diacritics, 12, [Spring, 1982.], pp.54-65.

Jerome, Judson, "A Poetry Chronicle, Part 1", Antioch Review, 23, [Spring, 1963.], pp.110-11.

Jones, A.R., "Necessity and Freedom: The poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton", Critical Quarterly, Vol:7, no:1, [Spring, 1964.

Jones, A.R. and C.B.Cox, "After the Tranquillized Fifties: Notes on Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin", Critical Quarterly, Vol:6, no:2, [Summer,1964.]

Juhasz, Suzanne, "The Critic as Feminist: Reflections on Women's Poetry, Feminism, and the Art of Criticism", Women's Studies, 5, [1977.], pp.113-27.

Kameen, Paul, "Review of Crossing the Water", Best Sellers, [1, November, 1971.], pp.347-48.

Kamel, Rose, ""Reach hag hands and haul me in" - Matrophobia in the Letters of Sylvia Plath", Northwest Review, [1981.]

Kenner, Hugh, " "Ariel" - Pop Sincerity", Triumph, 1, [September, 1966.], pp.33-34.

Killoh, Ellen P., "The Woman Writer and the Element of Destruction", College English, 34, [October, 1972.], pp.31-38.

King, Nicholas, "Poetry: A Late Summer Roundup", New York Herald Tribune, [26, August, 1962.], p.4.

Kissick, Gary, "Plath: A Terrible Perfection", The Nation, 207, [16, September, 1968.], pp.245-47.

Kolodny, A., "Some Notes on defining a "Feminist Literary Criticism" ", Critical Inquiry, 2, [Fall, 1975.], pp.75-92.

--"-- , "The Feminist as Literary Critic", Critical Inquiry, 3, [Summer, 1976.], pp.822-32.

Kristeva, Julia, "Women's Time", translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, Signs, [Autumn, 1981.], pp.13-35.

--"-- , "Herethique de l'amour", Tel Quel, Vol:74, [Winter, 1977.].

--"-- , "Psychoanalysis and the Polis", Critical Inquiry, 9, [1982.], p.2.

Lane, Gary, "Sylvia Plath's "The Hanging Man": A Further Note", Contemporary Poetry, 2, [Spring, 1975.], pp.40-43.

Larkin, Philip, "The Horror Poet", Poetry Review, Vol:72, no:1, [April 1982.], pp.51-53.

Lanser, Susan S., "Beyond The Bell Jar: Women Students of the 1970's", Radical Teacher, 6, [1977.], pp.41-44.

Lask, Thomas, "A Kind of Heroism", The New York Times, [8, June, 1966.], p.45.

Leger, Susan, "The Lure of Symmetry or, the Strange Impossibility of Feminist Criticism, Massachusetts Review, 24, [Summer, 1983.], pp.330-36.

Lindberg-Seyersted, "Notes on Three Poems by Sylvia Plath", Edda, 74, [1974.], pp.47-54.

--"-- , "On Sylvia Plath's Poetry", Edda, 72, [1972.], pp.54-59.

McCann, Janet, "Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems", South and West, 14:4, [1978.], pp.28-36.

Marcus, Jane, "Nostalgia is Not Enough: Why Elizabeth Hardwick Misreads Ibsen, Plath and Woolf", Bucknell Review, 24:1, [1978.], pp.157-77.

Martin, Wendy, "God's Lioness - Sylvia Plath, Her Prose and Poetry", Women's Studies, 1, [1973.], pp.191-98.

McConnell-Ginet, Sally, "Our Father Tongue: Essays in Linguistic Politics", Diacritics, 5, [Winter, 1975.], pp.44-50.

--"-- , "Intonation in a Man's World", Signs, 3, [Spring, 1978.], pp.541-59.

Meissner, William, "The Opening of the Flower: The Revelation of Suffering in Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" ", Contemporary Poetry, 1, [Spring, 1973.], pp.13-17.

--"-- , "The Rise of the Angel: Life through Death in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Massachusetts Studies in English, 3, [Fall, 1971.], pp.34-39.

Melander, Ingrid, " "The Disquieting Muses": A Note on a Poem by Sylvia Plath", Research Studies, 31, [March, 1971.], pp.53-54.

--"-- , " "Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows": An Early Poem by Sylvia Plath", Moderna Sprak, 65, [1971.], pp.1-5.

Moi, Toril, "Representations of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora", Feminist Review, 9, [October, 1981.], pp.60-74.

Mollinger, Robert, "Sylvia Plath's "Private Ground" ", Notes on Contemporary Literature, 5:2, [1975.], pp.14-15.

--"-- , "A Symbolic Complex: Images of Death and Daddy in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Descant, 19:2, [Winter, 1975.], pp.44-52.

Moraes, Dom, "Poems from Many Parts", Time and Tide, 41, [19, November, 1960.], p.1413.

Murphy, Francis, "Going it Alone: Estrangement in American Poetry", Yale Review, 56, [1966.], pp.17-24.

Nance, Guinevara and Judith P. Jones, "Doing Away with Daddy: Exorcism and Sympathetic Magic in Plath's Poetry", Concerning Poetry, 11:1, [1978.], pp.75-81.

Newman, Charles, "Candor is the only wile", Tri-Quarterly, no:7, [Fall, 1966, Womanly Issue.]

Nguyen, Thanh-Binh, "A Stylistic Analysis of Sylvia Plath's Semantics", Language and Style, 11, [1978.], pp.69-81.

Oates, Joyce Carol, "Review of Winter Trees", Library Journal, 97, [1, November, 1972.], p.3595.

Oberg, Arthur, "The Modern British and American Lyric: What Will Suffice?", Language and Literature, 7, [Winter, 1972.], pp.70-88.

--"-- , "Sylvia Plath and the New Decadence", Chicago Review, 20, [1968.], pp.66-73.

Oettle, Pamela, "Sylvia Plath's Last Poems", Balcony, 3, [Spring, 1965.], pp.47-50.

O'Hara, J.D., "An American Dream Girl", Washington Post Book World, [11, April, 1971.], p.3.

Ostriker, Alicia, " "Fact" as Style: The Americanization of Sylvia", Language and Style, 1, [Summer, 1968.], pp.201-12.

Owen, Guy, "Review of The Colossus", Books Abroad, 37, [Spring, 1963.], p.209.

Ozick, Cynthia, "Does Genius Have A Gender?", Ms., 6, [December, 1977.], pp.56,79-81

Pearson, Sheryl S., "The Confessional Mode and Two Recent Poets", Rockham Literary Studies, 2, [1972.], pp.1-10.

Perloff, Marjorie, "Extremist Poetry: Some Versions of the Sylvia Plath Myth", Journal of Modern Literature, 2, [November, 1972.], pp.581-88.

--"-- , "The Two Ariels: The [Re]Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon", The American Poetry Review, [November-December, 1984.]

--"-- , "Angst and Animism in the poetry of Sylvia Plath", Journal of Modern Literature, Vol:1, nos:1-3, [1970-71.]

--"-- , "On Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" ", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], pp.105-09.

Perry, John Weir, "Reconstitutive Process in the Psychopathology of the Self", Annals New York Academy of Sciences, 96, [1962.].

Poston, Carol, "Childbirth in Literature", Feminist Studies, 4, [June, 1978.], pp.18-31.

Poulet, Georges, "Phenomenology of Reading", New Literary History - 1, [1969.]

Porter, Peter, "Collecting Her Strength", New Statesman, 81, [4, June, 1971.], pp.774-75.

Pratt, Linda Ray, " "The Spirit of Blackness Is In Us..." ", Prairie Schooner, 47, [Spring, 1973.], pp.87-90.

Richmond, Lee J., "Books Covered and Uncovered", Erasmus Review, [September, 1971.], pp.157-62.

Robert, Daly, "Schizoid Rule-Following", The Psychoanalytic Review, Vol:55, 3, [Fall, 1968.]

Roland, Laurin K., "Sylvia Plath's "Lesbos": A Self Divided", Concerning Poetry, 9, [1976.], pp.61-65.

Romano, John, "Sylvia Plath Reconsidered", Commentary, 57, [April, 1974.], pp.47-52.

Rosenblatt, Jon, " "The Couriers" ", Explicator, 34, no:28, [December, 1975.].

Rosenstein, Harriet, "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath", Ms., 1, [September, 1972.], pp.44-51, 96-99.

Rosenthal, M.L., "Alienation of Sensibility and "Modernity" ", Arts and Sciences, [Spring, 1964.], pp.19-24.

--"-- , "Poetic Theory of Some Contemporary Poets or Notes from the Front", Salmagundi, 1, [1967.], pp.69-77.

--"-- , "Uncertain Odysseus: The Critic of Current Poetry", Shenandoah, 19, [1968.], pp.59-66.

Sadoff, Diane F., "Mythopoeia, the Moon and Contemporary Women's Poetry", Massachusetts Review, 19, [Spring, 1978.], pp.93-110.

Salamon, Lynda, " "Double, Double": Perception in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", Spirit, 37, [1970.], pp.34-39.

Salvaggio, Ruth, "Theory, Space, Space and Woman", Tulsa Studies in English - 7:2, [1988.]

Schor, Naomi, "This Essentialism which is not one: Coming to grips with Luce Irigaray", Differences, Vol:1, [Summer, 1989.], pp.38-58.

Schvey, Henry I., "Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar: Bildungsroman or Case History", Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters, 8, [1978.], pp.18-37.

Schwartz, Murray M. and Christopher Bollas, "The Absence at Center: Sylvia Plath and Suicide", Criticism, 18, [1976.], pp.147-72.

Shook, Margaret, "Sylvia Plath: The Poet and the College", Smith Alumnae Quarterly, [April, 1972.], pp.4-9.

Showalter, Elaine, "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year", Raritan, 3, [October, 1983.], pp.130-49.

--"-- , "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Crtiticism", Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 3, [Fall, 1984.], pp.29-43.

Smith, Pamela, "The Unitive Urge in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath", New England Quarterly, 45, [September, 1972.], pp.323-39.

Spender, Stephen, "Warnings from the Grave", New Republic, [18, June, 1966.]

Spivak, Gayatri, "The Letter as Cutting Edge", Yale French Studies, 55/56, [1977.].

Stainton, Rita T., "Vision and Voices in Three Poems by Sylvia Plath", Windless Orchard, 17, [Spring, 1974.], pp.31-36.

Stimpson, C.R., "Feminism and Feminist Criticism", Massachusetts Review, 24, [Summer, 1983.], pp.272-88.

Sumner, Nan McCowan, "Sylvia Plath", Research Studies, 38, [June, 1970.], pp.112-21.

Talbot, Norman, "Sisterhood is Powerful: The Man in Sylvia Plath's Poetry", New Poetry, 21, [June, 1973.], pp.23-36.

Taylor, Andrew, "Sylvia Plath's Mirror and Beehive", Meanjin, 33, [September, 1974.], pp.256-65.

Taylor, Eleanor Ross, "Sylvia Plath's Last Poems", Poetry, 89, [January, 1967.], pp.260-62,

Thwaite, Anthony, "I have never been so happy in my life", Encounter, [June, 1976.], pp.64-67.

Tulip, James, "Three Women Poets", Poetry Australia, 19, [December, 1967.], pp.35-40.

Uroff, Margaret D., "Sylvia Plath on Motherhood", Midwest Quarterly, 15, [October, 1973.], pp.70-90.

--"-- , "Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" ", Paunch, 42-43, [December, 1975.], pp.90-96.

--"-- , "Sylvia Plath's Women", Concerning Poetry, 7:1, [1974.], pp.45-56.

Van Dyne, Susan, ""More Terrible than She Ever Was" - The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems", introductory essay to Sylvia Plath's ""Stings", Original Drafts of the poem in Facsimile", reproduced from The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College, Northampton, [1982.]

--"-- , "Fueling the Phoenix Fire: The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus"", Massachusetts Review:24, [Summer, 1983.]

Vendler, Helen, "The Poetry ofSylvia Plath", Ziskind Lecture Series, Part-1, [13, December, 1971.], [in the Sophia Smith Women's Archives.].

Wagner, Linda, "Plath's "Ariel": "Auspicious Gales" ", Concerning Poetry, 10:2, [1977.], pp.5-7.

Watson, Barbara, "On Power and the Literary Text", Signs, 1, [Fall, 1975.], pp.111-18.

Whittier, Gayle, "The Divided Woman and Generic Doubleness in The Bell Jar", Women's Studies, 3, pp.127-46.

Williamson, Alan, "I Am That I Am: Ethics and Aesthetics of Self-Revelation", American Poetry Review, [January/February, 1974.], pp.37-39.

Zollman, Sol, "Sylvia Plath and Imperialist Culture", Literature and Ideology, 1, [1969.], pp.11-22.

INTERVIEWS:

Pinter, Harold, An interview with Kenneth Tynan, B.B.C. Home Service, [28, October, [1960.]

BOOKS:

Aird, Eileen, Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work, [Harper and Row, N.York, 1973.]

Alexander, Paul, ed., Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath, [Longman, London and N.York, 1972.]

Alvarez, A. , Beyond All this Fiddle, [Allen Lane-Penguin, London, 1968.]

--"-- , The Savage God, [Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.]

Annas, Pamela J., A Disturbance in the Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, [Greenwood, N.York, 1988.]

Aston, Elaine and George Savona, eds., Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance, [Routledge, London and N.York, 1991.]

Axelrod, Steven Gould, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1990.]

Bachelard, Gaston, The Poetics of Space, translated by Maria Jolas, [Orion Press, N.York, 1964.]

Bakhtin, M.M., Rabelais and his World, translated by Helene Iswolsky, [The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1968.]

--"-- , Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, [Manchester University Press, 1984.]

--"-- , Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, translated by Vern McGee, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, [University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986.]

Barnard, Caroline King, Sylvia Plath, [Twayne: U.S. Author Series, N.York, 1979.]

Barr, Marleen and Richard Feldstein, eds., Discontented Discourses, [University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989.]

Barthes, Roland, The Pleasure of the Text, [Farrar, Straus and Giroux Inc., N.York, 1975.]

--"-- , Writing Degree Zero, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, [Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. First published in 1953.]

--"-- , Image, Music, Text, translated by Stephen Heath, [Fontana Paperbacks London, 1977.]

Bassnett, Susan, Sylvia Plath, [Women Writers Series, Macmillan Educational, London, 1987.]

Beauvoir, Simone de, The Second Sex, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, [Harmondsworth Penguin, 1981. First published, 1949.]

Beckett, Samuel, Waiting for Godot, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1959.]

Benvenuto, Bice and Roger Kennedy, eds., The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction, [Free Association Press, Great Britain, 1986.]

Bernikow, Louise, Among Women, [Harper and Row, N.York, 1980.]

Blasing, Motlu Konuk, American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms, [Yale University Press, 1987.]

Bloom, Harold, The Anxiety of Influence, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1973.]

--"-- , ed., Modern Critical Views - Sylvia Plath, [Chelsea House Publications, N.York and Philadelphia, 1989.]

Brennan, Teresa, ed., Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, [Routledge, London, 1989.]

Bundtzen, Lynda K., Plath's Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process, [Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1983.]

Butscher, Edward, Sylvia Plath - Method and Madness, [The Seabury Press, N.York, 1976.]

--"-- , Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work, [Peter Owen, London, 1979.]

Broe, Mary Lynn, Protean Poetry - The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, [University of Missourie Press, Columbia, 1980.]

Brown, Cheryl L. and Karen Olson, eds., Feminist Criticism - Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose, [The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, New Jersey and London, 1978.]

Butler, Judith, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, [Routledge, N.York, London, 1990.]

Case, Sue-Ellen, Feminism and Theatre, [Macmillan, 1988.]

Chodorow, Nancy, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, [University of California Press, Los Angeles, London, 1978.]

Cixous, Helene and Catherine Clement, The Newly Born Woman, translated by Betsy Wing, [Theory and History of Literature, Vol:24, Manchester University Press, Paperback edition, 1987.]

De Lauretis, Teresa, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, [Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987.]

--"-- , Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema, [Indiana University Press, 1984.]

--"-- , ed., Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, [Macmillan Press, 1986.

De Man, Paul, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1971.]

--"-- , The Resistance to Theory, [Theory and History of Literature, Vol:33, Manchester University Press, 1986.]

Derrida, Jacques, Writing and Difference, translated by Alan Bass, [Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1978.]

Diyanni, Robert, Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions, [Random House, N.York, 1987.]

Dodsworth, Martin, ed., The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1970.]

Ehrenpreis, Irvin, Poetries of America - Essays on the Relation of Character to Style, [The University Press of Virginia, 1989.]

Eisenstein, Hester and Alice Jardine, eds., The Future of Difference, [G.K, Hall, Boston, 1980.]

Elam, Keir, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, [Methuen, London, 1980.]

Ellmann, Mary, Thinking About Women, [Virago Press, Ltd., London, 1979.]

Esslin, Martin, The Theatre of the Absurd, [Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962.]

Felman, Shoshana, Writing and Madness, translated by Martha Noel Evans, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.York, 1985.]

Firestone, Shulamith, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution, [The Women's Press, Ltd., London, 1979.]

Fletcher, John and Andrew Benjamin, Abjection, Melancholia and Love - The works of Julia Kristeva, [Routledge, London and N.York, 1990.]

Flynn, Elizabeth A. and Patrocino P. Schweickart, eds., Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1986.]

Freud, Sigmund, The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, translated by James Strachey and Anna Freud, [Hogarth Press, London, 1953.]

--"-- , Beyond the Pleasure Principle, translated from the II German edition by C.J.M.Hubback, [London, 1942.]

Gallop, Jane, Reading Lacan, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 1985.]

Garner, Shirley Nelson, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether, eds., The [M]Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 1985.]

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets, [Indiana University Press, 1989.]

--"-- , No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Vol:1, The War of Words, [Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1987.]

--"-- , The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination, [Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1979.]

Graves, Robert, The White Goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth, [Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1948.]

Grosz, Elizabeth, Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction, [Routledge, London, 1990.]

Hardwick, Elizabeth, Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature, [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.York, 1974.]

Hart, Lynda, ed., Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre, [The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1989.]

Hawthorn, Jeremy, Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character - from Oliver Goldsmith to Sylvia Plath, [St. Martin's Press, N.York, 1983.]

Heilbrun, Carolyn, G., Writing A Woman's Life, [The Women's Press, London, 1989.]

Holbrook, David, Sylvia Plath - Poetry and Existence, [The Athlone Press, London, 1976; Paperback edition, 1988.]

Holquist, Michael, Dialogism - Bakhtin and his World, [Routledge, London and N.York, 1990.]

Homans, Margaret, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson, [Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980.]

Homberger, Eric, A Chronological Checklist of the Periodical Publications of Sylvia Plath, [University of Exeter, American Arts Documentation Centre, England, 1970.]

Huf, Linda, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman - The Writer as Heroine in American Literature, [Ungar, N.York, 1983.]

Humm, Maggie, Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics, [The Harvester Press Ltd., Great Britain, 1986.]

Ionesco Eugene, Rhinoceros, from Plays, Vol:IV, [John Calders [Publishers] Ltd., London, 1960.]

Irigaray, Luce, The Sex which is not One, translated by Catherine Porter, [Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.York, 1985.]

--"-- , Speculum of the Other Woman, translated by Gillian G. Gill, [Cornell University Press, 1985.]

Iser, Wolfgang, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1978.]

Jackson, Rosemary, Fantasy - The Literature of Subversion, [Methuen and Co., London, 1981.]

Jacobus, Mary, Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism, [Methuen and Co., London, 1986.]

Johnson, Barbara, The Critical Difference - Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1980.]

Juhasz, Suzanne, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women - A New Tradition, [Harper and Row, N.York, 1976.]

Kramrisch, Stella, The Presence of Siva, [Princeton University Press, 1981.]

Kristeva, Julia, Revolution in Poetic Language, translated by Margaret Waller, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1984.]

--"-- , Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, translated by Thomas Gora, Leon Roudiez and Alice Jardine, [Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford, 1982.]

--"-- , Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S.Roudiez, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1982.]

--"-- , About Chinese Women, translated by Anita Barrows, [Marion Boyars Publication Ltd., London, 1977.]

Kroll, Judith, Chapters in a Mythology, [Harper and Row Publications, N.York, 1976.]

Kyle, Barry, Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1976.]

Lacan, Jacques, Ecrits: A Selection, translated by Alan Sheridan, [Tavistock Publications, London, 1977.]

--"-- , The Language of the Self - The Function of Language in Psycho-analysis, translated by Anthony Wilden, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1986.]

--"-- The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, translated by Alan Sheridan, [The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1977.]

Lakoff, Robin, Language and Women's Place, [Harper Colophon, 1975.]

Lane, Gary, ed., Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, [The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1979.]

Libby, Anthony, Mythologies of Nothing: Mystic Death in American Poetry, 1940-70, [University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1984.]

Lodge, David, ed., Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, [Longman, London and N.York, 1972.]

Malmsheimer, Lonna M., edited by Leonard Unger, Sylvia Plath, [in Women Writers, Supplement 1, Part-2, Charles Scribner and Sons, N.York, 1979.]

Markey, Janice, A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich- A Study of Feminism and Poetry, [Peter Lang, Frankfurt, N.York, 1984.]

--"-- , A Journey into the Red Eye: The poetry of Sylvia Plath - a critique, [The Women's Press Ltd., 1993.]

Marks, Elaine and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., New French Feminisms: An Anthology, [Schocken, N.York, 1981.]

Martin, Linda Wagner, Sylvia Plath: A Biography, [Simon and Schuster, N.York, 1987.]

Melander, Ingrid, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath : A Study of Themes, [AlmQvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1972.]

Miller, Nancy, ed., The Poetics of Gender, [Columbia University Press, N.York, 1986.]

Mitchell, Juliet, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, [Penguin Books Ltd., England and N.York, 1974.]

--"-- , Women: The Longest Revolution - Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis, [Virago Press Ltd., London, 1984.]

Mitchell, Juliet and Jacqueline Rose, eds., Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the ecole freudienne, [Macmillan, London, 1982.]

Moers, Ellen, Literary Women, [The Women's Press, London, 1978.]

Moi, Toril, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, [Methuen, London, 1985.]

Moi, Toril, ed., The Kristeva Reader, [Basil and Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.]

Molesworth, Charles, The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry, [The University of Missourie Press, Columbia and London, 1979.]

Montefiore, Jan, Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing, [Pandora Press, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1987.]

Newman, Charles, ed., The Art of Sylvia Plath, [Chatto Windus, London, 1970.]

Nigro, August, J., The Diagonal Line, [Associated University Press, London, Toronto, 1984.]

Oakley, Anne, Sex, Gender and Society, [Maurice Temple Smith, 1972.]

Oberg, Arthur, Modern American Lyric - Lowell, Berryman, Creeley and Plath, [Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1978.]

Orr, Peter, ed., The Poet Speaks, [Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966.]

Ostriker, Alicia Suskin, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America, [The Women's Press, Ltd., London, 1987.]

--"-- , Writing Like A Woman, [The University of Michigan Press, 1983.]

Phillips, Robert, The Confessional Poets, [Southern Illinois Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1973.]

Pinter, Harold, The Birthday Party, [Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1960.]

Pratt, Annis, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction, [The Harvester Press, 1982.]

Reis, Lawrence, Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry, [Port Washington, N.York, 1979.]

Rich, Adrienne, Of Woman Born - Motherhood as Experience and Institution, [Virago Ltd., 1977.]

--"-- , On Lies, Secrets and Silence, [Virago, London, 1980, re-print.]

Rose, Jacqueline, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, [Virago Press Ltd., London, 1991.]

Rosenblatt, Jon, Sylvia Plath - The Poetry of Initiation, [The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1979.]

Rosenthal, M.L., The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II, [Oxford University Press, London, 1967.]

Rosenthal, M.L. and Sally Gall, The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1983.]

Schmidt, Michael and Gravel Lindop, eds., British Poetry since 1960: A Critical Survey, [Carcanet Press Ltd., Oxford, 1972.]

Shaw, Robert, ed., American Poetry since 1960 - Some Critical Perspectives, [Carcanet Press Ltd., Publication, Cheshire, 1973.]

Showalter, Elaine, The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture - 1830-1980, [Pantheon Books, N.York, 1985.]

--"-- , ed., The New Feminist Criticism - Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, [Virago Press, London, 1986.]

Silverman, Kaja, The Subject of Semiotics, [Oxford University Press, N.York, 1983.]

Simpson, Louis, A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, [Macmillan, N.York, 1978.]

Smith, Stan, Inviolable Voices - History and Twentieth Century Poetry, [Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1982.]

Spacks, Patricia, The Female Imagination, [George Allen and Unwin [Publications] Ltd., Great Britain, 1976.]

Steiner, Nancy Hunter, A Closer Look At Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1974.]

Stengel, Erwin, Suicide and Attempted Suicide, [Penguin Books Ltd., Great Britain, 1964.]

Stevenson, Anne, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath, [Harmondsworth Penguin, 1989.]

Suleiman, Susan R., and Inge Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation, [Princeton University Press, 1980.]

Tabor, Stephen, Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography, [Mansell, U.S.A., 1987.]

Thomas, Trevor, Last Encounters, [Published privately, Bedford, England, 1989.]

Thurley, Geoffrey, The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid-Century, [Edward Arnold Ltd., London, 1977.]

Todd, Janet, Gender and Literary Voice: Women and Literature, [Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., N.York, London, 1980.]

Uroff, Margaret Dickie, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, [Urbana, London, 1979.]

Wagner, Linda W., ed., Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath, [G.K.Hall and Co., Boston, 1984.]

--"-- , ed., Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage, [Routledge Critical Series, London, 1988.]

Williamson, Alan, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry, [Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1984.]

Yalom, Marilyn, Maternity, Mortality and the Literature of Madness, [Pennysylvania State University Press, 1985.]

Yeats, W.B., The Collected Poems, [Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1960.]

Yorke, Liz, Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry, [Routledge, London, N.York, 1991.]