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The Big Strip Tease:
Female Bodies and Male Power in
the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked.

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1855)

A naked lunch is natural to us,
we eat reality sandwiches.
But allegories are so much lettuce.
Don't hide the madness.

Allen Ginsberg, "On Burroughs' Work" (1954)

Now to the come of the poem, let me be worthy
& sing holily the natural pathos of the human soul,
naked original skin beneath our dreams
& robes of thought, the perfect self identity
radiant with lusts. . . .

Allen Ginsberg, "Fragment 1956" (1956)

After fifty so much joy has come,
I hardly want to hide my nakedness.

Robert Lowell, "Plane-Ticket" (1973)

I got up finally; I walked down to the pond.
I stood there, brushing the grass from my skirt, watching myself,
like a girl after her first lover

turning slowly at the bathroom mirror, naked, looking for a sign.
But nakedness in women is always a pose.
I was not transfigured. I would never be free.

Louise Glick, "Marathon" (1985)

For a significant group of American poets of the fifties and sixties—writers as diverse as the proper but confiding Robert Lowell and the flamboyantly exhibitionist Allen Ginsberg—nakedness, the state of undress, the process of unclothing, divulging, telling, seems a significant poetic gesture. Figurative nakedness abounds in the works of many of these poets, offering itself to the reader like an antidote to the repression of the McCarthy era and later as a perfect complement to the freedoms of the age of Aquarius. Concomitantly, changing poetic forms of the period frequently seem to strip away falseness, to confront the reader with unadorned statement, bald truth, sometimes harsh utterance.

Following the example set by Walt Whitman, these poets—first the Beats, then the confessional poets—equate the romantic liberation of self with a rejection of social and artistic restriction. In a volume aptly titled *Naked Angels*, John Tytell asserts that the most felicitous metaphor for the efforts of the Beats to express their "mythic outlook on their own lives and interactions" (3) is the metaphor of nakedness. Tytell finds the Beats' "emphasis on baring the body and exposing the soul" to be "an intuitive reaction to a betrayal the Beats felt because of mass acceptance of demeaning changes in the American idea of self-determination. Nakedness signified rebirth, the recovery of identity" (4). And Robert Phillips characterizes the confessional poets this way: "A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove." Confessional poetry, he goes on to say, "dispenses with a symbol or formula for an emotion and gives the naked emotion direct, personally rather than impersonally" (8). Such readings of these poets may seem problematic because they tend to equate the poet's voice with the poet's self and, at times, may be bound up with unquestioned assumptions about the unity of the self, the stability of that self, and the identifiability of the self. Contemporary theoretical questionings of the

notion of a unified, stable **self** notwithstanding, these tropes—nakedness, unmasking, divesting—offer a promising path into the work of those poets called confessional and into the writings of their less acceptable brothers in poetry, the Beats.¹

Sylvia Plath was not a member of the exclusively masculine fellowship of the Beats, and her affiliation with the group we call "confessional poets" has come into question; however, in her work, her life, and her attitudes toward creativity, Plath bears many similarities to members of both groups—especially with respect to self-disclo-

1. Analyses of confessional poetry which problematize the subject frequently forward a poetic gesture which also relies upon disclosure, even as such readings question the existence of a unified, stable subject which may be disclosed. Lawrence Kramer, for example, offers a thoughtful reading of the genre with his consideration of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in which he counters the traditional view of Lowell's poetry as "barefaced self-revelation" (80). Kramer argues that Lowell's voice participates in the confessional mode of "confiding" by operating in the same way as the voice of the "classical analyst" (84), but he goes on to observe that even as this voice discloses, it uses such disclosure to evade and to obscure. Hence tropes of nakedness seem incongruent with Kramer's reading of the genre. But despite his emphasis on the evasive tactics of Lowell's voice, Kramer ultimately asserts that we do view Lowell unmasking to some more authentic moment of insight: "'Home after Three Months Away' ends Part I of *Life Studies* with a rare glimpse of the Lowell ego stripping off its armor of identifications" (88; emphasis added).

Steven K. Hoffman also questions the casual equation of confessional voice with authorial self, but—like the work of Kramer—Hoffman's analysis still leads us back to tropes of disclosure. In his effort to establish a poetics of the confessional mode, Hoffman takes up the issue of the "elaborate masking techniques" of the twentieth century as part of the confessional dynamic (688). Such a discussion necessarily involves a consideration of the opposing trope—nakedness—as well. Hoffman takes as a starting point A. R. Jones's definition of the confessional voice: "the persona is naked ego involved in a very personal world and with particular private experience" (694). Hoffman counters Jones's assertion with the observation that poetic voice is, in fact, "a carefully constructed aesthetic entity," the result not of direct, unmediated self-exposure but rather the effect of "pure invention" (694). But despite his attention to the differentiation between voice and writer, between persona and person, and despite his assertion that the confessional poet "constructs" rather than unclothes and reveals a self, Hoffman, too, implies the poetic gesture of unmasking when he asserts that the characteristic movement of their poems is... "from necessity and entrapment to qualified liberation" (702). A loosening of stricture is implied here which bespeaks a kind of baring. For both Kramer and Hoffman, then, the study of the confessional poets involves, even if implicitly, figures of baring and nakedness.

sure.² Like the writings of the Beats, Plath's poetry is flamboyantly revealing—if not self-revealing—and like the work of the confessional poets, Plath's poetry seems grounded in the life experiences of some denizen of the twentieth century. Even if we are uncomfortable insisting that Plath's poetry bears a direct and identifiable relationship to the events of her own life, and even if we pay close attention to Steven Gould Axelrod's caveat that Plath "exhibited some ambivalence about her identity relations with her represented 'I'" (*Wound 10*), it does seem clear that within Plath's verse, the nakedness, the stripping away that characterizes the work of the confessional poets finds a significant place.

Although Ted Hughes, Plath's poet husband with whom she had a troubled and stormy relationship, ultimately has little to gain by foregrounding the autobiographical nature of Plath's work, and although he qualifies his remarks on the autobiographical aspects of Plath's poetry, he is quick to assert that her work is highly bound up with very personal content. As Hughes puts it, Plath shared with Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, classified along with Plath as confessional poets, "the central experience of a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one" ("Notes" 81). Foregrounding this personal connection, Plath herself characterizes her poetry this way: "one makes of one's own heavens and hells a few hunks of neatly typewritten paper" (*Journals* 93). And in her brief prose work "Context," Plath asserts that she is moved by those writers for whom poetry is an expression of their very personal essence: "The poets I delight in are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing" (65). As Mary

2. M. L. Rosenthal and Robert Phillips agree that Plath is clearly a member of the school we call "confessional," but other readers have questioned or even rejected this category for a variety of reasons, primarily because over a period of time such a designation seemed more to diminish Plath's art than to clarify it and because such readings focus obsessively upon Plath's life to the exclusion of her work. Mary Kinzie remarks, for example, that Plath "did not become a 'confessional poet' until she committed suicide" (289). For further discussion see, for example, Newman, Markey, Milford, Buell, Bundtzen, Broe, and Dickie. Sandra Gilbert's "My Name Is Darkness" is especially helpful here because Gilbert explores provocative differences between male and female confessional poets. The male confessional poet, she tells us, "writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of a map tradition, the grandson of history. . . . The female poet. . . writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self" (446).

Lynn Broe points out, for Sylvia Plath, "The *naked* ego wriggling on a couch won a dramatic authority over . . . healthy and whole gentility" (vii; emphasis added).

Plath's veneration of personal statement and intimate revelation notwithstanding, it is the differences—especially with regard to figurative nakedness—between Plath and the male confessional poets that are ultimately illuminating. More than peculiarities of individual temperament, these differences hint at provocative discontinuities between the creative experiences of a woman writing at mid-century in America (and, in Plath's case, Britain as well) and of men writing from a similar context. And in many ways such differences reflect the startling dissimilarities in representation we find in the lines of poetry quoted at the beginning of this essay. These lines—drawn, with the exception of those from Whitman's *Song of Myself*, from the works of American poets since the fifties—convey strikingly divergent attitudes toward the body and specifically toward nakedness. For the male writers, the unclothed **body** of the male speaker betokens joyous transcendence, freedom, power. For the female subject in Louise Glück's verse, however, nakedness does not bring that female subject closer to the self or to truth or to power. Rather, nakedness for the female subject is experienced, at least within the context of this work, as yet another barrier between the self and the world or even between the authorial self and the persona it inscribes. The disclosure of the female body is, here, merely another false and falsifying gesture.

It does not come **as** a surprise that we find in Plath's poetry a concern with the body and with the physical, for she seemed—if we may take her poetry, her letters, her fiction, and her journals as reliable sources—a passionate and even sensuous woman.³ Axelrod asserts that "Plath enthusiastically traced **connections** between body and text" (*Wound* 9-10), and Joanne Feit Diehl, in her consideration of Plath's poetry and the American sublime, argues that Plath's "primary trope [is] the engendered body" (136). But when her use

3. In fact, in justifying the cuts she and Ted Hughes made in Plath's journals before releasing them for publication, Frances McCullough inadvertently foregrounds Plath's sexuality rather than downplaying it when she writes, "there are a few other cuts—of intimacies—that have the effect of diminishing Plath's eroticism, which was quite strong" (x).

of the body the metaphorical rendering of the female body specifically is given close attention, we find that Plath inhabits a poetic universe far removed from that of Ginsberg or Whitman or Lowell. For her, the body stands not as a shimmering emblem of the soul's glory but **seems**, rather, an embarrassing reminder of the self's failures, an icon of the poet's vulnerability. The speaker of Plath's poem "The Jailer," obviously kept violently against her will ("I have been drugged and raped"), clearly naked in her imprisonment ("My ribs show"), remarks pathetically "I am myself. That is not enough" (226).⁴ The line is strikingly distant from Whitman's ebullient "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" and Robert Lowell's contented "so much joy has come, / I hardly want to hide my nakedness." In fact, Plath's lines echo Anne Sexton's searing and hopeless assertion that the bare, unhidden female self is pathetically insignificant: "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself" ("You, Dr. Martin" 4). Somehow, at least in the works of Sylvia Plath, the unadorned, physical self of the female subject cannot function as a metaphor in the same way that it does for the male subject; the female body reminds us only that the female self is unworthy inadequate, and—ultimately—vulnerable rather than ascendant.

Terence Diggory has masterfully outlined the different use made by male and female **poets** of the confessional mode, and, appropriately Diggory centers his consideration upon metaphors of nakedness. In a discussion of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, Diggory asserts that the poetic tradition of confession began with Walt Whitman. But while Whitman and those male poets who followed him valued nakedness as a gesture of honesty and freedom, the women poets who followed Dickinson seemed more inclined to present themselves as armored, covered, or concealed (136). When Diggory considers the contemporary female poet, he insists—persuasively—that the confessional mode and its accompanying metaphors of nakedness continue to function differently for such writers as Sylvia Plath than they do for writers like Robert Lowell: "Confessional verse by women appears more reticent, more closed" (143).⁵

4. All references to Plath's poetry are to *The Collected Poems*.

5. In a comparison of Dickinson and Plath, Natalie Harris asserts that, in fact, Plath's

Diggory's thought-provoking consideration of this difference between the masculine and feminine traditions in American poetry falters, however, when he seeks some motivation for these divergent attitudes toward nakedness and disclosure. While he admits that "Armor is important in defining a female poetic tradition" (136), Diggory lapses into tautology when he asks why the female poet might find armor or protection more desirable than confession: "images are valued principally not as expressions of modesty or a desire for ornament, but as means of protection. If we ask, 'Protection from what?', the simplest answer is, 'Nakedness'" (136).

His compelling analysis notwithstanding, Diggory has neglected one essential point in his consideration of this problem: that nakedness is an extraordinarily different *physical* experience for the female than for the male. Inherent in the physical experience of nakedness—at least in industrialized Western cultures of the twentieth century—are dangers quite as horrifying as the emotional unmasking which *Diggory* claims the female poet finds intrusive. And it is here, in turning our lens upon the body from which the figure is drawn, that we begin to discover that the representation of that physical body may function quite differently for the poet who writes as a woman and for the poet who writes as a man. The unclothed male body is—in terms of the dominant figurative systems of Western discourse—powerful in that it is sexually potent, sexually armed; the naked female body is—again, in terms of the figurative systems which dominate this period—vulnerable in that it is sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration, exploitation, rape, pregnancy.

In an effort to understand Plath's representation of the female body in her poetry, we might consider for a moment how physical differences between men and women may have been conceptualized in her time. Susan Brownmiller published her study of rape—*Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*—twelve years after Plath's death, and Brownmiller's work was clearly supported and influ-

enced by the growing women's movement in America, the spirit of which has stimulated illuminating work on Plath herself. It is tempting, therefore, to argue that the insight Brownmiller brings to bear upon the construction of female and male bodies in American culture was focused almost directly upon the time during which Plath lived and eventually wrote. A study of Brownmiller may, then, offer a glimpse of precisely the sense of feminine and masculine corporeality which Plath herself had internalized. Brownmiller asserts that the physical differences between men and women, what she calls "an accident of biology," are responsible for the existence of rape:

Man's structural capacity to rape and woman's corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself. Had it not been for this accident of biology, an accommodation requiring the locking together of two separate parts, penis and vagina, there would be neither copulation nor rape as we know it.

(13-14)

It is important to note that Brownmiller's analysis tends to naturalize rape by designating it simply an inevitable function of a physical given—men rape because they are biologically equipped to do so, and women are potentially victimized by rape because they are biologically destined to be so victimized. Brownmiller's statement provides a telling example of how masculine nakedness and feminine nakedness are constructed within the discourse from which Plath writes.

If we consider Brownmiller's rendering of the consequences of physiological differences between male and female, the implications are far-reaching, indeed terrifying, and would certainly have seemed so to Plath. First, in this representational schema, the sexes are unequally endowed with respect to their powers of physical imposition and assertion. As Brownmiller puts it, although woman probably resisted mightily when she first realized that she could be violated sexually, her resistance was necessarily not of the same kind as her violator's because it was not sexual; she could not produce the weapon necessary to inflict herself upon a man: "Fleet of foot and spirited, she would have kicked, bitten, pushed and run, but she could not retaliate *in kind*" (14). In the discourse of masculine

and feminine physicality and of rape, then, as Brownmiller constructs it, woman finds herself **unarmed**. And, as Brownmiller states it, this construction of sexual differences has had a profound effect upon culture:

Man's discovery that **his** genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, . . . rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more **or** less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all **men** keep *all women* in a state of fear.

(14-15)

In terms of the construction of the female and male bodies which Brownmiller offers, a construction which most certainly formed part of Math's world view, nakedness does not convey the sense of assertion, freedom, and power for the female that it does for the male, and when the female poet offers herself as subject, or when she constructs a female subject using the **figure of the naked female body** the issue becomes **even** more complicated. In considering how the symbolic order within which any female artist functions compromises her use of the female body as trope, Terence Diggory broadens his perspective and enriches his discussion of masculine and feminine figures of nakedness in confessional **poetry**; he observes that woman's body does not—in art or in poetry—represent woman's self:

What is certain is that the dominance of the female nude in the visual arts prevented literary nudity from having the Same meaning for women as it did for men. If a woman took off her clothes in a book she would become "a nude"; she would not become naked. If the book were pornographic, the woman would simply invite the associations of a different set of ideals. In no case would her nudity express the real, **or** symbolize that raw honesty that nakedness embodied for Whitman and **his** successors.

(147)

Thus the female poet inherits a tradition in which the female body plays a specific and rigidly codified role. **As** Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it, "The cultural significance of the female body is not only . . . that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a *symbolic construct*" (Introduction 2). In a discussion of **the female** nude in painting,

Charles Bernheimer takes on woman's place in that symbolic construct, pointing out that "woman is put on display for the pleasure of a spectator presumed to be male. Her naked body becomes nude insofar as it is seen as an erotic object offered to the man's gaze, to **his** imaginary knowledge" (13). Bernheimer goes on to observe that the female "nude, like the prostitute, is an erotic commodity; her nakedness is valuable not for its marked individuality and subjective expression, but for its ability to feed male fantasies that erase woman's desiring subjectivity" (13).

Here Bernheimer foregrounds the difficulties inherent in the female writer's use of the female body as an emblem of self-assertion or self-exploration. Because feminist film theory has focused upon the female body as the object of the masculine gaze, considerations of such theory further this exploration of the female body **as** metaphor. In her groundbreaking discussion of the role **of** the female in film, Laura Mulvey characterizes woman's relationship to "patriarchal society": "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture **as** signifier for the male other, bound **by** a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied **to** her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (7). In this role, the female body cannot stand in as a representative for the assertive female self; the female body is, rather, read or experienced as an emblem of another's, a male's, pleasure, not as a proclamation of self-identity:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in **looking has** been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact **so** that they can be said **to** connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

(11)

For Sylvia Plath, then, the problem she faced as a writer involved a **conflict between her lived experience as a woman and her desire to**

encode that experience and that experiencing body in the discourses available to her. In her quest to achieve the poetic liberty and transcendence valued by her male contemporaries, Plath sought the freedom to expose the female body assertively and positively. But Plath lived within a **culture** and wrote from within a tradition both of which defied her figurative efforts. Plath was well-read and considered herself an accomplished and sophisticated poet, aware of the poetic tradition to which she belonged and the poetic excellence to which she aspired. In this tradition—that extending from Whitman to both the Beats and the confessional poets—masculine nakedness came to represent power, assertiveness, honesty, self-expression, and even the writing of poetry itself. From the male body figures of power and invention are drawn. And in fact Plath herself seemed to have conceived of her creative processes in very masculine terms. Steven Gould Axelrod points out Plath's reliance upon male writers for metaphors with which to explore her own identity: "as a female late-comer burdened by male precursors whom she considered 'the really good boys'. . . , Plath almost unavoidably represented herself in terms of their tropes" ("Mirror" 299).⁶

Thus Plath turned to masculine models to provide her with a structure for her creative subjectivity. While such cross-thinking may seem curious, Naomi Scheman observes that the phenomenon is not unusual for women, especially those well indoctrinated by the values of their culture, and that it is even predictable, "once one accepts that gender is socially constructed." In a discussion of film, she notes that "the norms of maleness are learnable, and some girls and women, especially those of privileged race and class, have of late been allowed or even encouraged to learn some of them" (64). Susan Suleiman states the problem this way: "Women, who for centuries had been the *objects* of male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations, had to discover and reappropriate themselves as *subjects*" ("*Re*Writing the Body" 7). In positioning herself as a subject, then, Plath appropriates inappropriate figures with which to shape her subjectivity and her creativity. The irony of Plath's situation is that while her own figures for creativity are drawn from masculine models, her use of such figures is deeply

6. Axelrod quotes here from Plath's journals (108).

compromised—for both her and her readers—by the reality of her own femaleness, by her body which is a woman's body.

For Plath, then, finding a way to figure both her creativity and her femaleness becomes deeply problematic. Because Plath found creativity powerful, she identified in her creativity with those creatures she found powerful—men. But she clearly resented masculine freedoms. In an early entry in her journal she wrote:

My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent.

(Journals 35)

And during her college years, Plath seemed already to experience the restrictions her femaleness would impose upon her: "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity" (Journals 30). In fact, Plath so completely identified power and hope with masculinity that she confided to a college friend that her ideal family would consist only of herself, her husband, and their magnificently male children; according to Nancy Steiner, "She had decided that her husband would be a very tall man and she spoke, half-jokingly, of producing a race of superchildren, as superlatively large as they were intelligent. The children, she predicted, would all be boys" (77).

Because Plath associates power so exclusively with men, her conviction that femininity is suffocating and inhibiting comes as no surprise. Spending some time at home with her mother in Wellesley before beginning her years at Smith College, Plath finds herself rebelling against the atmosphere of her family home. Her rebellion seems to have been precipitated more by the femininity of her mother's house than by its authority as a representative of familial control.

Plath yearns to "step outside for a few moments before going to bed; it was so snug and stale-aired in the house," but when she tries to open the door, she cannot get outside; she feels trapped:

Through the glass square, high in the door, I saw a block of sky, pierced by the sharp black points of the pines across the street. And there was the moon, almost full, luminous and yellow, behind the trees. I felt suddenly breathless, stifled. I was trapped, with the tantalizing little square of night above me, and the warm, feminine atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery smothering embrace.

(Journals 12)

Very early in her life and later, as she developed as a writer, Plath associated this suffocating femininity strongly with failure as an artist. At the age of eighteen, her greatest fear was that she would be "accused of sentimentality or emotionalism or feminine tactics" (Journals 25), and later she condemned her writing for "the feminine burbling I hate" (Journals 70). In a letter to the poet Lynne Lawner, she wrote that she would reject "Feminine (horror) lavish coyness" and would instead create poems that were "grim, antipoetic" (qtd. in Alexander, Rough Magic 229). Under Ted Hughes's influence, Plath seems to have worried even more about her writing being too feminine; in a letter to her mother dated April 29, 1956, she frets, "My voice is taking shape, coming strong. Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine; they are strong and full and rich—not quailing and whining like Teasdale or simply lyrics like Millay" (Letters 244). These fears concerning her art are obviously related to the failures that Plath sees plaguing women writers; in her journal she wonders, "Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale or the other brilliant women? Neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh, horrible word) of deep, basic desires? . . . Will I be a secretary—a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually and professionally while I am impeded?" (Journals 62). Ironically, her answer from very early on was concealment, a covering of the feminine aspects of the self which so threatened her art, a clothing of the inadequate female body. In a nearby journal passage, she concludes, "Masks are the order of the day—and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (Journals 63).

Plath's mistrust of the female writer can be seen later in her search for mentors. While Plath expresses great admiration for Virginia Woolf, it is telling that in her laudatory descriptions of Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, Plath praises Lawrence for his sexuality, his physicality, and admires Woolf for her asexual control, for her ability to transcend her femaleness: "how does Woolf do it? How does Lawrence do it? I come down to learn of those two: Lawrence because of the rich physical passion—fields of forces—and the real presence of leaves and earth and beasts and weathers, sap-rich, and Woolf because of that almost sexless, neurotic luminousness" (Journals 199). While teaching at Smith, struggling with her own writing and overwhelmed by her teaching duties, Plath was seized with a furious and contemptuous rage against the women writers of her own generation. In her journal she writes, "Jealous one I am, green-eyed, spite-seething. Read the six women poets in the *New Poets of England and America*. Dull, turgid. Except for May Swenson and Adrienne Rich, not one better or more-published than me," and in the same passage, she compares herself to Virginia Woolf in terms which deplore the comparison: "What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough" (Journals 185–86).

Clearly, Plath's view of herself as a writer was complicated by the fact that she condemned the weaknesses she and her culture associated with femaleness. Her desire to forge an identity as an artist was shaped—and in some ways distorted—by this conflict. What seemed most difficult for her to overcome was her very real awareness of the female body as vulnerable. In fact, in an entry in her journal, she conceives of writing—that assertive and masculine act—as a defense against the horrors of her own physical being. As she and Hughes pass their time in Boston, she becomes increasingly desperate:

Nose podgy as a leaking sausage: big pores full of pus and dirt, red blotches, the peculiar brown mole on my under-chin which I would like to have excised. Memory of that girl's face in the med school movie, with a little black beauty wart: this wart is malignant: she will be dead in a week. Hair untrained, merely brown and childishly put up: don't know what else to do with it. No bone structure. Body needs a wash, skin the worst: it is this climate: chapping cold, desiccating hot: I need to be tan, all-over-brown, and then my skin clears and I am all right. I need to have

written a novel, a book of poems, a *Ladies' Home Journal* or *New Yorker* story and I will be poreless and radiant. My wart will be nonmalignant.

(*Journals* 287–88)

Not only will writing alleviate the vulnerability of the female body, but it will specifically make it impervious to assault: "I will be poreless."

Plath's sensitivity to the vulnerability of the naked female form and her creative exploitation of this vulnerability emerge clearly in her early poem "Tale of a Tub" (1956). The poem is compelling because here Plath encounters her most consistently engaging subject—the female *self*, perhaps even herself—and yet the work *makes* the reader vaguely uneasy as well because the encounter with that self is pathetically debasing. The detached speaker who watches the self is majestically judgmental, emotionally uncommitted, and, therefore, not compromised by the "feminine burbling" Plath had professed to hate—"The photographic chamber of the eye / records bare painted walls"—while the self, "the ego," is "caught / naked in the merely actual room" (24). The "eye" / I or center of the poem, the self that *sees* and judges, *seeks* constantly to evade the poverty of the body that it surveys, and discernment and penetration—ing clearly, being seen clearly—are associated with humiliating, public disclosure; Plath wonders, "*can our dreams / ever blur the intransigent lines* which draw / the *shape* which shuts us in? absolute fact / intrudes even when the revolted eye / is *closed*" (25). The penultimate *stanza* reveals both Plath's sense of physical vulnerability and her strategy for dealing with that vulnerability in her art:

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge
the fabrication of some cloth to cover
such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:
each day demands we create our whole world over,
disguising the constant horror in a coat
of many-colored fictions.

This nakedness is at once *disgusting* ("the constant horror") but not dangerous (it is, rather, "ridiculous" and yet vulnerable and in danger of some unstated violation (something "stalks" it). The *unclothed* body in *Plath's* poem is a far *cry from* the transcendent and *triumphant* figure Ginsberg and Lowell offer in their works. Moreover,

poetry—the "coat / of many-colored fictions"—exists not to uncover or disclose that triumphant figure, but to disguise it even more fully.

Thus Sylvia Plath experienced early on a strong urge to mask herself, and both in poetry and in life this masking proved increasingly futile. For despite the frequent yearnings Plath felt to "crawl back abjectly into the womb" (*Journals* 60) and cover herself, she longed too to uncover the self, to unmask, to strip her self bare.⁷ As early as 1952, as she felt herself overwhelmed by problems, she wrote in her journal that she had visited her friend Marcia and cried pitifully and openly: "There, on the bed, she touched the soft spot, the one vulnerable spot in the hard, frozen, acrid little core in me, and I could cry. God, it was good to let *go*, let the tight mask fall off, and the bewildered, chaotic fragments pour out" (*Journals* 64).

It is, perhaps, a testament to Plath's obsessive need to mask herself that her closest relationship during these years may have been with Eddie Cohen, the young man from Chicago who had written her a fan letter after the publication of one of her stories. In his recent biography of Plath, Paul Alexander speculates that the physical distance between the two ameliorated some of Plath's anxieties about disclosure: "*Maybe* [Cohen] saw the fifteen-hundred-mile chaperone as an obstacle to be overcome; on the contrary, Sylvia regarded it as a buffer that allowed her to reveal herself to Eddie without risking any physical—or romantic—involvement" (67). In September 1952, in fact, after two years of correspondence with Eddie Cohen, Plath became sufficiently uncomfortable with what she had revealed to him that she asked him for her letters back; she told him she wanted to use them as material for a *story* (Alexander 95–96). Cohen refused to return the letters. In fact, when he finally met Plath, he was appalled by the intensity and depth of her defenses: "She *was all mask*. . . . There was no spontaneity. She seemed incapable of an impulsive remark" (qtd. in Alexander 90).

Clearly these conflicts concerning assertion and self-disclosure

7. Plath refers frequently in her journal to her need to return to the womb or to retreat and hide somehow. Of course, Plath's obsessive concern to cover herself is reflected in her first suicide attempt (she buried herself in the basement crawlspace of her home) and finally in her suicide (she placed her head in an oven).

on the one hand and masking and vulnerability on the other found their way into Plath's poetry, shaping it unrelentingly. In her review of Alexander's biography, Emily Leider remarks, "Plath's life was a kind of psychological and artistic dance of the seven veils in which, instead of veils, successive layers of masks—the dutiful daughter, the popular coed, the brilliant and ambitious student, the subservient wife, the formal and reticent poet—are stripped away to reveal a core of molten **fury** and power" (8). And ultimately that fury and power are directed at the female self, the woman's body that inhabits Plath's poetry. Ronald Hayman clearly identifies Plath's war against herself when he **writes**, "She was ready to fight against herself, but she often found herself siding **with** the part she wanted to suppress against the part she wanted to release" (132). In seeking to liberate the female body, Plath subjected it to a representational order which dictated its annihilation.

These dueling impulses clearly **war** in Plath's **bee** sequence—the poems with which Plath had intended to end Ariel (Van Dyne 156).⁸ Plath's sense of female vulnerability, *specifically*, female vulnerability to physical nakedness, **is** clear in these **poems**, but her desire to unclothe and discover the disguised female **self** is powerfully manifest as well. The five poems ("The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee **Box**," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering"), which Plath wrote in October 1962, deal with issues of power, and many sympathetic readers find these works triumphant and even **feminist**.⁹

8. For a discussion of Ted Hughes's reordering and publication of Plath's original Ariel manuscript, see Hayman (200–202) and Perloff (*Two Ariels*). Ronald Hayman is quite instructive on Ted Hughes's control of Plath's manuscripts and on Hughes's refusal to grant permission to quote to those whose work he found objectionable.

9. Sandra Gilbert, for example, reads the bee sequence as the narrative of Plath's release through her art: "Being enclosed—in plaster, in a bell jar, a cellar, or a wax house—and then being liberated from an enclosure by a maddened or suicidal or 'hairy and ugly' avatar of the self is . . . at the heart of the myth that we piece together from Plath's poetry, fiction, and life" ("Fine, White Flying Myth" 251). According to Gilbert, while the queen bee must die, she still achieves her moment of freedom in her flight.

Gilbert does not really make clear how the self—the poet's self as represented by the queen bee—is liberated when the self is confined to death or even when the self is art

However, a closer look at the metaphors of nakedness and disclosure makes clear that Plath cannot transcend or rewrite the figurative language which imperils her female subject. In the poem which opens the series, "The Bee Meeting," the speaker finds herself at risk because she is unclothed or inadequately clothed: "In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection, . . . I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" (211). Not only is the speaker in danger because of her nakedness, but she is also somewhat ridiculous ("nude as a chicken neck"), and she associates her vulnerable nakedness not with the potential for closeness or intimacy, nor with the possibility of self-expression, but with the danger of violation (the **bees**, the gorse with its "spiky armory" [211]), with her alienation (apparently no one loves her), and with her potential sacrifice: "I am led through a beanfield. . . . Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold" (211–12). Throughout the sequence, the queen, with whom the speaker compares herself ("I / Have a self to recover, a queen" ["Stings" 215]), is safe because she is hidden; she will not make herself open or vulnerable to the younger "virgins" or to the peering "villagers." Clearly, to be seen is to be in danger; to remain passive and unnoticed **is** much safer: "If I stand very still, they will think I am cow-parsley" ("The Bee Meeting" 212).

The bees continue to present a threat to the body of the speaker, and she incessantly—almost in an incantation or ritual—insists upon her unimportance, on her hiddenness **as** her protection: "They might ignore me immediately / In my moon suit and funeral veil" ("The Arrival of the Bee **Box**" 213). The queen is released finally from her isolation; she is permitted to unclothe herself from the honeycomb which has hidden and protected her, to fly naked and triumphant:

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house.
(*"Stings"* 215)

But the queen's triumph is qualified (as the triumph at the end of "Lady Lazarus," which this passage foreshadows, is qualified). The

queen may now be her free, naked self, but she is a red scar, the result of a wound or some unidentified pain, and she flies only because she must die; she flies over the world that decrees that she must die. Her nakedness promises to undo her. It is too easy to say that Plath—as an artist—has found transcendence or triumph in death. The queen, who has lost her "plush," is, despite her flight, despite her majestic death, "Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful" (214). Even if we wish to read the poem as very positive, it is clear that the unclothed body of the female subject here—the queen/speaker—does not experience the exuberance or triumph that Whitman or Ginsberg could express. In fact, she cannot even speak that triumph from the uncovered female body.

It is significant, too, that the sequence ends not with an affirmation but rather with a series of questions. The queen, who was quite easily replaced, is dead, but the bees remain with a new queen: "The bees are all women, / Maids and the long royal lady. / They have got rid of the men" ("Wintering" 218). While the final lines of "Wintering" are poignant and lovely and while they do imply a certain power in the female community of bees, the tone is so uncertain, so tentative, that the sense of ascendancy toward which Plath moves is hopelessly compromised. Ultimately the sequence ends with an almost inarticulate sadness:

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their f i i
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring.
("Wintering" 219)

Female nakedness, thus, is a liability in terms of Plath's poetry, and no matter how strongly she might long for the freedom and power of nakedness or confession, such freedom will not be hers. Several of Plath's poems make clear the impossibility of successfully unmasking her self. Although such an aggressive and potentially liberating strategy would be positive in the works of a male poet, its use in Plath's work proves horrifying in Plath's work be-

cause of the vulnerability and even insubstantiality of the female subject.¹⁰ Three poems about illness and surgery—"Face Lift" (1961), "In Plaster" (1961), and "Fever 103°" (1962)—delineate the fruitlessness for the female subject of attempting to unmask herself. It is telling that the three works which deal specifically with the relationship of Plath's poetic voice to the self are set in metaphors of physical illness and disability.

In the notes to Plath's *Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes writes that "Face Lift" was based upon the "experience of an acquaintance, requisitioned for the poet's myth of self-renewal" (291). The acquaintance was probably Dido Merwin, who asserts that Plath was fascinated by the operation that Merwin had undergone: "Sylvia asked questions and expressed interest in my incisions and spectacular technicolour bruises" (330). But if "Face Lift" is, in fact, about the experience of self-renewal, it is a negative and oppressive experience. The poem traces the process of the speaker's peeling off the layers of herself, but the process seems to involve a self-annihilation ("Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard" [156]) more than a self-assertion. To peel off unwanted layers involves not just peeling off clothing or falseness; the very self—because of its unworthiness—must be sloughed off as well: "Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper." By the time the old self has been eradicated, the person enclosed within that self is dead, too: "Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady. . . . Let her die there." What is left is "Pink and smooth as a baby," but a baby is without personality, without a fully developed sense of subjectivity. The stripping

10. Almost in direct contrast to my point here, Sandra Gilbert finds that the primary difference between male and female confessional poets is that the male poets, such as John Berryman, Lowell, and W. D. Snodgrass, lay bare their own lives not to uncover or disclose themselves but rather to embody the situation and ethos of their time: "The male confessional poet . . . even while romantically exploring his own psyche, observes himself as a representative specimen with a sort of scientific exactitude" ("My Name" 445). The female confessional poet, on the other hand, writes "in a vein of self-definition." Gilbert emphasizes the significance for the female confessional poet, in whose company she places Plath, of the "persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self." This she calls "a distinctively female poetic mode" (444). But I would argue that Plath's full use of the salutary and empowering strategy of self-definition is compromised by her metaphorical use of her own female body. This body with its vulnerabilities and liabilities, is the emblem that Plath must use for the self she seeks to define. Her use of that emblem irrevocably compromises her effort.

has, in effect, been carried out **as** an act of violence against the mature female self.

The speaker of "In Plaster" is similarly confronted with the existence of a **layered** or doubled **self**; the speaker of the **poem** lies in a bed (probably a hospital bed), **encased** entirely in a plaster cast.¹¹ The being which encloses her, "This new absolutely white person" (158), is superior to "the old yellow one" (the one the speaker identifies with) because "She doesn't need food, she is one of the real **saints**." Her only problem is that "she had no personality." The inner **self** is—by contrast to the perfect outer shell—full of "complaints," spiteful, critical, and dissatisfied. The internal voice is obviously the more fully developed of the **two** figures in the poem, but the relationship between the **two** **becomes** problematic **as** the plaster shell loses interest in the inner component of her **being** and begins, **disastrously**, to take on a **personality** of her own: "She stopped fitting me **so** closely and seemed offish. / I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself" (159).

What is peculiar about the **two** selves of "In Plaster" is that the inner self is not lovelier or more valuable than the outer shell, which it surely would be for Ginsberg or Lowell, embracing as they do a poetics of triumphant disclosure; **this** inner self is, in fact, "ugly and hairy" (160). And—because of Plath's troubled relationship to her body as an emblem of identity—the traditional renunciation of the outer shell for the inner reality has no place in Plath's grammar. Plath cannot, because she is female, because she deplors what she perceives as the weakness and vulnerability of her female **body**, successfully use it as an emblem for a strong and robust inner self. In fact, the two selves of "In Plaster" war to **see** who is more powerful, as though for a woman the compliant and perfect exterior were as desirable, as authentic, as the questioning and human interior: "Now I see it must be one or the other of **us**" (160).

Anne Stevenson **sees** the poem **as** representing "the fierce resentment the inner Sylvia—the real one, the poet—felt in the presence of her artificial exterior," with which she was "locked in deadly battle" (212), but **oddly**, in **this** **poem** Plath finds the "real" **self** un-

11. Ted Hughes appends a note to this poem, pointing out that Plath wrote "In Plaster" in the same month during which she spent a week in hospital undergoing an appendectomy. He goes on to explain: "The patient in complete plaster on a high-bouncing bed" (Collected Poems 291).

wholesome (it is "yellow," "a half-corpse"). Sandra Gilbert explains this by saying that the inner, ugly self represents the unacceptable, angry, aggressive female self which Plath had to liberate ("Fine, White Flying Myth" 251), but such an explanation does not address the more basic issue of why the female writer can so easily debase and vilify that self which represents her most cherished beliefs and **goals**. It is difficult to perceive such a poem as triumphant, **as** Gilbert does, when the self **is** held to be **so** unappealing. Moreover, when placed next to the traditional **poetry** of survival or selfdefinition and selfdiscovery, "In Plaster" **seems** perverse, demented even. Plath's view of the components of the self reveals profound ambivalence concerning the value of the search for female identity.

The bared self is held in contempt in "Fever 103" as well. Here the voice of the poem burns with some intense heat—sin, lust, sexuality, sickness—and this heat moves the speaker to a state beyond the normal. The tactile sensation of the poem is almost painful, for we can feel the "Radiation," the "sullen smokes," the "tongues of hell" as the speaker burns, "flickering, off, **on**, off, on" (231). In the note which he appends to this poem in *The Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes writes that Plath introduced the work on a BBC radio reading, saying that "Fever 103" is "about two kinds of fire—the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify." She went on to add, "During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second" (293). The speaker addresses her interlocutor as "Love" and "Darling," and—given Paula Bennett's assertion that Plath as a poet is "unambiguously heterosexual" ("Pea" 109)—we might presume to designate this figure "he." **As** she proceeds through the poem, the speaker seems to move away from this listener in both distance and saintliness, as though he were associated with those fires of hell which Plath mentions: "I am too pure for you or anyone. / Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts **G o d**" (232). But as the speaker reaches her hottest, most intense moment, **as** she burns away her impurities, Plath's language displays **curious** anomalies:

I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him
(Myself dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
To Paradise.

(232)

What is most perplexing about this poem is that because the sensation of burning is so strong, we are left with the feeling that at the moment of apparent emergence and transcendence, just when the movement of the poem leads us to expect some new, purified self, we find nothing there. The poem cannot be read as presenting "liberating images or doubles for the self" ("Fine, White Flying Myth" 253), which is how Gilbert understands the work—because nothing is liberated. The only selves the speaker presents are the "whore petticoats,* for if we read the last "sentence" of the poem carefully, we discover that there is no grammatical subject there because there is no conjugated verb. Once the whore petticoats dissolve, nothing is left to make the ascension: "Not you, nor him // Not him, nor him / (Myself dissolving, old whore petticoats)— / To Paradise" (232). It is as if, the exterior having been burned away, the revealed body—which we expect to discover—has been eradicated too. Where is the self that Plath seems to be trying so hard to uncover? Although the movement of the poem leads us to expect some revelation, when we look with anticipation, there is no one there.

Plath's association of power with masculinity and her alignment of weakness and ineffectuality with her own femininity imply a specifically sexual corollary in her conceptualization of her own creativity. Plath not only deplors the "femininity" of her own writing, but she also makes clear that—for her—creativity is a function of sexuality, specifically of masculine sexuality and masculine desire. Plath seems to equate the fullness of the female body with loss of creative power; at one point, as a very young woman, she writes, "God, must I lose it [her sensitivity] in cooking scrambled eggs for a

man . . . hearing about life at second hand, feeding my body and letting my powers of perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic with disuse?" (*Journals* 33),¹² A few years later, during her stay in Cambridge, she picks up the metaphors of food and corpulence again, making clear that creativity springs from sinuous muscularity and masculinity: "I must get back into the world of my creative mind: otherwise, in the world of pies & shin beef, I die. The great vampire cook extracts the nourishment & I grow fat on the corruption of matter, mere mindless matter. I must be lean & write & make worlds beside this to live in" (*Journals* 157). And in a letter to her mother, Plath asserts that she wants to write poems that are "working, sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said" (*Letters* 244).¹³

Ultimately, the most powerful act a male can perform, in Plath's personal mythology, is rape, for it is her vulnerability to rape which inhibits Plath from enjoying the full freedoms that men take for granted.¹⁴ She writes in her journal,

12. Paula Bennett contends that Plath "linked her poetic creativity with her biological capacity to give birth and her success as a woman with her success as a wife" (*My Life* 99). But aside from a few such connections in her journal, Plath made statements concerning the relationship of her poetry with motherhood primarily in letters to her mother. Most readers agree that Plath's "letters home" tend to present the most pleasant and acceptable picture Plath could construct, so perhaps the conflicts concerning her sexuality and her creativity which permeate the journals form a more accurate index to Plath's feelings about such issues.

13. Robert Lowell's language, in his introduction to *Ariel*, reveals that he senses Plath's association of the creative with the masculine. Although Lowell foregrounds—in somewhat confusing terms—the fact that Plath is a woman ("This character is feminine, rather than female"; "What is most heroic in her [is] . . . her hand of metal with its modest, womanish touch"), his delineation of her power makes clear that he values her voice for its uncompromising masculinity: "Dangerous, more powerful than man, machinelike from hard training, she herself is a little like a racehorse, galloping relentlessly with risked, outstretched neck" (ix).

14. Ted Hughes asserts that Plath's poems are "chapters in a mythology" ("Notes" 81), and Judith Kroll takes the name of her study of Plath, *Chapters in a Mythology*, from Hughes's remark. Kroll makes the point that a careful look at Plath's opus reveals a consistent body of beliefs, metaphors, and images, and that to understand Plath, we must take seriously her construction of this system of myths. Kroll refers to Plath's poetry as "a mythic drama having something of the eternal necessity of Greek tragedy." For Kroll, Plath's works become fully comprehensible only when taken as a whole, for "they constitute a unified body of work, and . . . the early poems logically and consistently progress toward the final formulation of the myth and its subsidiary

my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yes, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night.

(*Journals* 30; emphasis added)

What Plath describes here is the American artist as hero—the free, powerful "rough," as Whitman would *call* him (No shutter'd room or school can commune with me, / But roughs and little children better than they" [85]). And Plath's exclusion from this creative brotherhood, as she perceives it, is a result of her physical vulnerability to rape—"assault and battery." Plath goes on in later journal entries to make clear that she associates the act of rape—the one thing she cannot do, the one thing that can be done devastatingly to her—with the power of writing: "The virginal page, white. The first: broken into and sent packing. All the dreams, the promises: wait till I can write again, and then the painful, botched rape of the first page" (*Journals* 161). For Plath, the act of writing is a violently assertive act, one which places the writer in an invincible, almost cruel position of masculine power. It is an act which necessitates the stripping away of false layers, the exposure of the powerful virile self, and the imposition of that self upon the page. When Plath thinks of herself as artist, she thinks of herself as male. The following passage from Plath's *journals* reveals Plath's conjunction of masculinity, power, sexuality, and creativity:

I am part man, and I notice women's breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress . . . but that is the artist and the

motifs" (6). While Kroll explores, in her study of Plath's personal myth, Plath's imagery of metamorphosis (the symbols of the moon, the figure of the dying god, and the sacred marriage) and the rendering into myth of Plath's own life, she fails to consider the manner in which Plath's use of metaphor is shaped by her existence in a female body and by her imagining of creativity as a masculine act, the most powerful expression of which is a metaphorical rape of the page. What emerges from an examination of Plath's journals, then, is a preliminary insight into the mythical construction of femaleness and creativity which eventually erupted in Plath's poetry.

analytical attitude toward the female body . . . for I am more a woman; even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring. . . . I desire the things which will destroy me in the end.

(*Journals* 23)

Plath's resentment of masculine sexuality and masculine creative power is strong and bitter, and her metaphor for dealing with this power is ultimately sexual as well. In a discussion of Richard Sassoon, for whom she apparently felt great passion, she writes, "I will believe in you and make you invincible on this earth. . . . Yet the vampire is there, too. The old, primal hate. That desire to go round castrating the arrogant ones who become such children at the moment of passion" (*Journals* 100).

A poem written while Plath was at Cambridge establishes her attitude toward masculine sexuality as an emblem of masculine power and creativity. "Pursuit" (1956) is a rather overwrought depiction of what Plath refers to in her journals as "the dark forces of lust." She adds, "It is dedicated to Ted Hughes" (*Journals* 115), whom she had only recently met. The poem is enlightening in that Plath construes sexual attraction as a "hunt" in which the female is the victim, "Flayed by thorns," that is, stripped by her ordeal, and her lover is the predator, a "panther" who "prowls more lordly than the sun" (22). His power is the power of the rapist, for he "Compels a total sacrifice" and invades the female's only safety, the sanctity of her own home, her own mind and heart: "The panther's tread is on the stairs, / Coming up and up the stairs" (23).

Ronald Hayman argues that because "the panther is emphatically male, and women are his victims," the poem alludes—with respect to the panther and the power of his voice—to Ted Hughes (95). Anne Stevenson, however, observes that the panther is Plath's "libidinous double," the "deep self full of violence and fury she was suppressing under her poised and capable appearance" (78). Perhaps both are accurate readings of this work, for the panther is clearly male, but rather than being a manifestation of Hughes's power—the panther is probably an externalization of the rapaciously creative part of Plath's self which devours and obliterates the female propriety Plath so loathes in her own writing. The panther,

because it is male and because it *can* rape, is for Plath the most compelling figure for her creativity,

Another pair of poems, one of them early ("The Queen's Complaint," 1956) and one much later ("Daddy" 1962), offers a more graphic view of the means by which power can be achieved in Plath's warring systems of metaphors. "The Queen's Complaint" has the tone—and perhaps the inevitability—of a fable, in which a mighty queen is brought low by a giant who stalks through her land. His violence is rendered sexually: he "used her gentle doves with manners rude" as he "ramped through" her "dainty acres" (28). Even she—the most powerful of women, a queen—is not exempt from his violation. She is made vulnerable because she is made naked, and her vulnerability is exploited sexually: "Of rich attire / He made her shoulders bare / And solaced her, but quit her at cock's crowing" (28). Ironically, it is not the giant's violence that undoes the queen but his sexuality, for she cannot—among her own countrymen—find another like **him**, "Whose force might fit / **Shape** of her sleep, her thought." She is—like Plath herself, lamenting her lost or unattainable creative power—left **only** with a whimper: "How sad, alas, it is / To see my people **shrunk so small**, so small" (29).

By the time Plath wrote "Daddy" her faith in the inevitability of this violent sexual dynamic apparently remained firm, but her attitude toward her place in this relationship had changed. Tragically she still cherished the notion that masculine sexuality was the perfect emblem for power ("Every woman adores a Fascist") and that she was doomed to sexual and social victimization ("I think I may well be a Jew" [223]), but in "Daddy" she appropriates that power for herself or for the female voice in that poem; and she does so in sexual terms. She becomes the rapist who terrifies, who imposes himself upon others, who makes his imprint—both poetic and psychological—upon reality. She no longer hides because she no longer has to. She has shed the femininity which threatened to undermine her. The existence of the poem itself, addressed to "Daddy," demonstrates that her silence has been broken, that the father who has rendered her speechless has lost **his** ability to erase her: "I never

could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my **jaw**" (223). The act of **speaking, thus**, is her **first** appropriation of the father/lover's power.

Both of the men against whom the voice rails in "Daddy" have committed crimes against the speaker's heart: Daddy is the one who "Bit my pretty red heart in two," and the lover who serves as a replacement for Daddy "said he was you / And drank my blood for a year." Thus the female subject's revenge must be structured similarly: she has **killed** Daddy and his representative ("There's a stake in your fat black heart" [224]) by means of a figurative rape. She thrusts a deadly force through Daddy's evil center, his source of power over her, his heart. And the very fact that she speaks constitutes a violation of Daddy's privilege and power. Plath here reverses the metaphorical expectations and writes a poem that is overwhelmingly powerful but also unsettling since the speaker of the poem **does** not undermine the system of control which violates her but rather turns the tables, accepting this gendering of violence **as** inevitable. If she will **no** longer be victim, she must become victimizer. If she will no longer be raped, she must become the rapist. If she will no longer subject her bared self to violation, she must herself become violator. *

In his foreword to Sylvia Plath's journals, Ted Hughes inadvertently **foregrounds** these two opposing forces in Plath's creative dynamic (her physical existence as a woman, which gave rise to tropes drawn from her experience as a woman, and her encoding of creativity in figures of masculine power). Hughes observes that Plath was motivated by a need to bare herself **as** the writers she admired had done; she was, he says, driven by "a craving to strip away everything from some ultimate intensity, some communion with spirit, or with reality or simply with intensity itself" (xi). But he goes on to point out that, in keeping with her vulnerable existence as a woman, she protected herself, hid herself "Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings. . . . I never saw her show her real self to anybody—except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life" (xii). Plath knew that self-exposure, at least for her as a woman, led only to danger. On the one hand, Plath asserted herself forcefully—in her figurative universe, **masculinely**—and yet she hid herself obsessively—as a woman must hide her physical self to survive in the representa-

tional structure from which Plath operated. In his introduction to Plath's collection of prose, *Johnny Punica and the Bible of Dreams*, Hughes aligns these conflicting impulses in Plath's psychological makeup with her divergent approaches to prose: "her greatest ambition was certainly to get a story into *The New Yorker* or the *Ladies' Home Journal*—the two alternating according to her mood" (4).

Many scholars have noted the divided nature of Plath's voice and her work. Some have thought she was simply "schizophrenic" and attributed the tensions in her works to her purported mental illness.¹⁵ In fact, Plath's poetry involves not a war between Math and the forces around her, not a dialogue with another or many others, so much as a war with two factions of the self, or more precisely a conflict in Plath's own conceptual systems. And this war is violent. Plath—as the masculine creator, in terms of her own metaphors—seems to battle with the feminine subject through whom she speaks in her poetry, and this conflict is embodied in the sexual metaphors of the poems themselves. In keeping with the power structures of our culture and with the pervasive violence against all that is female, the female voice in Plath's poetry is ultimately threatened and sometimes destroyed by the "masculine" creator. And the female body—the emblem of the poet herself—can never be a symbol of absolute transcendence or power.

What this conflict yields is a curiously violent poetry, as Plath's own words reveal. While at Smith as a lecturer in the English department, Plath ponders her planned book of poetry wondering what to call it. In a burst of enthusiasm, she writes, "what a poet I will flay myself into" (*Journals* 223). The words are strangely aggressive and provocative; to flay is to strip away to make raw and naked, and this stripping away promises to be painful, even bloody, but the stripping is necessary to Plath's view of creativity: the soul, the self, must be made bare. Probably most unsettling of all, however, is the fact that the victim of this flaying is to be the female poet herself. A. Alvarez seems aware of the violence in the poetry when he describes his first encounter with "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy"

15. Charles Newman points out that Plath's entire body of work can be seen as dialogue with an "Other," but he encourages us not to indulge in "irresponsible gossip about that Other" (25). For other such approaches to Plath, see for example, Holbrook, Broe, Annas, Perloff ("On the Road to Ariel"), and Bassnett.

(which Plath read to him on a visit to his home in London): "I was appalled. At first hearing, the things seemed to be not so much poetry as assault and battery" ("Sylvia Plath A Memoir" 195), and elsewhere he writes, "The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness" ("Sylvia Plath" 68). Elizabeth Hardwick describes the powerful and yet peculiar destructiveness in Plath's work most aptly when she observes, "Many of the poems are tirades. . . . when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her plot" (102).¹⁶ While we may

16. The unusual and violent cast of Plath's poetry coupled with her suicide, has caused the criticism of her opus to take on a rather ghoulish character. Much criticism has devolved into a reading of Plath's life rather than an examination of her works. In fact, the most intense critical war in the short history of Plath scholarship has probably revolved around how much we should read into her works concerning her life—as woman, as mother, as daughter, as wife, as poet, as student. Generalizations which proceed from the poetry have frequently been extended to apply to the poet, and insights from the poet's life have, conversely, been used to shed light on the works. Neither tactic is necessary, and each has probably constituted a violation of Plath's privacy and a lapse in simple decorum. In fact, everything we need to know about the 'war,' the 'dichotomies,' the schizophrenia, and the conflict is in the poetry itself, contained within the language Plath used ultimately to obliterate her own creative efforts.

A. Alvarez initiated this heated focus on Plath's life with his series of sympathetic pieces immediately following her suicide. Plath died on February 11, 1963, and Alvarez's 'A Ret's Epitaph' appeared in *The Observer* (no. 8955) on February 17, 1963, only six days later (Kinzie 291). In 1971, Alvarez's memoir on Plath was published in *The Observer*, later to appear in *The New American Review*, and finally to serve as the introduction to Alvarez's *The Savage God* (Alexander, *Ariel Ascending* xii). According to Paul Alexander, "The first installment was so troublesome in its exactness that *The Observer* did not run the second half of the piece" (*Ariel Ascending* xii). Alvarez focused so heavily upon Plath's unhappy life and her untimely suicide, and he did so so swiftly after her death, that the ensuing obsessive concern with the connection between the life and the art was inevitable. Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* also encourages a heavily biographical approach to Plath in that a good half of this collection is devoted to memoirs and reminiscences rather than critical or interpretive essays. Janice Markey severely criticizes Butscher's critical biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* for perpetuating "the myth of a suicidal woman" (Markey 20). Markey points out that David Holbrook furthers this misguided critical/biographical effort with his *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, charging that Holbrook insists that we cannot understand Plath's work without taking into account her madness (Markey 20). Needless to say Markey disapproves of such considerations of Plath and finds them "as inaccurate . . . as the claim of those critics who see Plath as just another member of the Confessional school, whose revelling in neurosis was part of an established tradition" (21).

Mary Lynn Broe concurs with Markey that such emphasis on biography and madness robs Plath of her stature, deploring the direction that the confessional aspects of Plath's poetry have caused criticism of her works to take: "The poet died by suicide early in

wish to avoid a reductive equation of Plath's poetic **gestures** with Plath's final act of violent **self-destruction**, Alvarez and Hardwick unerringly designate the explosive core of Sylvia Plath's creative dynamic.

Three works written near the end of Plath's life offer convincing evidence that the nakedness so valued by the male poets of Plath's generation had become for her a powerful **figure**, but that the power of this **figure** was oddly transformed or **reshaped** when Plath sought to appropriate it for the female subject. "A Birthday Present" (dated September 30, 1962) is a provocative piece in that it presents the act of uncovering as the voice in Plath's poem **observes** it rather than as she **participates** in it. The speaker of the poem contemplates a birthday present, asking, "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly is it beautiful?/ It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?" (206). As the speaker pleads with her unnamed interlocutor to reveal what is behind the veil, it becomes clear that whatever is hidden there is frightening and powerful. She **assures** her listener that the "enormity," the "variety; and the threat of the present ("It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center / **Where** spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history" [207–8]) do not deter her from her desire to see behind the covering: "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil" (208). But the result of letting down the veil will not be a moment of transcendent vision; instead it will be one of murderous enlightenment. At this point, what hides behind the veil—not necessarily the female body since female subjectivity seems centered upon the speaker of the poem—has become a threat, and the moment of undressing becomes a potent instance of aggression:

1963, an event that set in stony relief images of terror, death, insanity, and melodrama in the poetry. . . . Her art appreciated only as the poems were dvalued into slide tissues for the biographical drama. . . . Since 1963 a remarkable range of poems have been autopsied, reduced to snippets of coroner's reports, and then reassembled every few years in some new literary exhuming" (ix). Broe goes on scathingly to criticize "speculative" and "biographical" critics, "the mythmakers and the demythologists," "the crowd that hears her literary ventriloquism and the one that watches her stage-direct her own Gothic romance.. Broe criticizes feminist critics as well for missing Plath's irony and her emotional range (ix–x). Broe's stated and admirable aim is to give Plath back her shape as a poet (xii).

If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would **know** you were serious.

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,
And the universe slide **from my** side.

(208)

What is most **curious** about "A Birthday Present" is that the speaker is not at all sure—at this point—whether the presence that lurks behind the veil is masculine or feminine (she asks, "has it breasts, has it edges" [206]), but what she does seem certain of is that the act of undressing **can** be a momentous and threatening one. It is **as** if Plath has come to some awareness that she requires an unmasking, that she must create-somehow—the act of unveiling in order to get at an incandescent moment of poetic truth. Because an unveiling of the female self will prove dangerous, Plath engages her audience in contemplating the outcome of a more mysterious disclosure. But here Plath only speculates—never making a firm statement—about the potential of that undressing and about what exactly is revealed. Whatever is unveiled, however, will be monumental; it promises to have the power of a rape: the knife will not simply offer pain and disfigurement; it will enter, violate, and deprive the **female** observer of life. **Thus** the disclosure of the poem is a powerful gesture because what is revealed is not the vulnerable female body; rather, what is revealed is some masculine entity which threatens and intimidates the female subject of the poem.

"Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus"—written within a week of each other during October 1962—further reveal Plath's conviction that undressing has become for her a powerful poetic gesture, and in these poems it is the female speaker who finally disrobes—and here she attempts to appropriate the power of nakedness for herself. Plath does not simply contemplate from the spectator's point of view the horrors and the vigor of the act of undressing; now her female subject dares to make herself naked, and she does so in an attempt to make herself mighty. At this point, nakedness has somehow become strongly assertive, at least at one level in these poems.

"Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus" take up the power of the uncovered body that Plath began to explore in "A Birthday Present." But in these two later poems, that figurative nakedness is compromised by the metaphorical significance of the female body. The naked force in "A Birthday Present" is ultimately masculine since it has the potential to enter the speaker like a cruelly sharp knife; the body that is unclothed encodes the assertiveness of the revealed male body. The body made bare in "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah," however, is female, and for that reason the power of that body's undraping must be—at least in terms of Plath's metaphorical universe—necessarily diminished.

The female speaker of "Purdah" is clothed and hidden, giving back to her more dominant partner only some image of himself:

My visibilities hide.
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.

(242-43)

She claims that she is his "Even in his / .Absence," but she becomes increasingly threatening. "Priceless and quiet," the speaker begins to unloose her power in a sort of undressing: first "One feather," then "One note," until finally she becomes more and more dangerous:

And at his next step
I shall unloose
I shall unloose—
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart—

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.

(243-44)

The diction of the poem undermines the anger and danger which the unclothing in the poem surely conveys and the vengeance its

speaker seeks, for the melodramatic building of the threat seems to lose its vigor as the center of the poem is uncovered. Appropriating the masculine metaphor of nakedness as assertive and powerful, Plath seeks to render the female body triumphant and imposing in its nakedness. But the figure in this poem is still the "Doll"; she is still female, so that her nakedness becomes not so much a transcendence of the forces imposing themselves upon her as it seems a "shriek" of protest and murderous fury. Her nakedness, because she is female, is insufficiently imposing to accomplish her purpose—which is some rearrangement of the distribution of power in this dyad. She must accompany this nakedness with strong and lethal weapons—the claws of the lioness. Interestingly the claws remind us of the knife in "A Birthday Present"; they are powerful because they can tear and enter and violate; they can penetrate—in a figurative rape—the garment of the chosen victim. In order to claim the power of the male, the voice must use the male's weapon—forced entry.

"Lady Lazarus" conveys the same sense of confusion or ambivalence in that the power of the speaking subject of the poem seems undermined by the melodramatic unclothing of that subject. Lady Lazarus is clearly—like the speaker of "Purdah"—meant to threaten; she asks rather sarcastically, "Do I terrify?", but the language by means of which she shapes her unclothing seems to compromise the grandeur of her act. She is not covered by grime or grit or falseness; her covering is somehow already too feminine, too ineffectual: "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen. // Peel off the napkin" (244). "Lady Lazarus" presents most clearly one of the central problems with Plath's use of the metaphor of nakedness, for in this poem Plath refers to this act of unclothing as "The big strip tease." And in this act, no woman is terrifying, no woman is triumphant, no woman is powerful, for she offers herself to "the peanut-crunching crowd" in a gesture that is "theatrical" (245) rather than self-defining, designed to please or to appease her viewers more than to release herself.

To strip is to seduce; it is not to assert oneself sexually or psychologically. And by the end of the poem, the speaker seeks to shame the male viewer who is exploiting her; she threatens him openly:

"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair /— And I eat men like air"

(247). But the threat is empty. Alicia Ostriker observes, too, that the rage here is "hollow" because the reader is fully aware that the speaker of this poem "is powerless, she **knows** it, she hates it" (102). But Ostriker does not name the source of this powerlessness—the speaker's physical vulnerability. The female subject has offered here pieces of herself, she has displayed herself not in **an** assertive way but in a sexually provocative and seductive way, and—at the very end—she resorts to descriptions of her appearance—her red hair—but not delineations of her reality—her anger. She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous, for she must offer the female body as an object rather than assert it as a *weapon*. It is telling, too, that the speaker's audience in "Lady Lazarus" is made up entirely of men (Herr God, Herr Lucifer, Herr Doktor), for by revealing herself only before such an audience, she ensures that her unveiling will be read not as a powerful assertion of identity but rather as a seductive gesture of submission and invitation.

The work which most perfectly embodies Plath's conflicting sets of figures concerning power and nakedness is "Ariel" (October 1962), for this poem shows how Plath's metaphorical universes collide but also how her mutually exclusive systems of representation give rise to some of the most effective and beautiful poetry she wrote. Plath noted in her journal that she was **privileged** to listen to Auden discuss his view of Shakespeare's Ariel as representative of "the creative imaginative" (*Journals* 77), so one might assume that in this poem she is revealing something about her **own** view of creativity.¹⁷ What is curious is that the creativity which emerges so energetically here is ultimately undone within the context of the poet's own presentation of that creativity.

M. L. Rosenthal points to the basic conflict of the poem in observing that "In a single leap of feeling, it identifies sexual elation (in the

17. This poem has been read as dealing with everything from sports to sex; some such interpretations have been fostered by the remarks Hughes appended to the poem in his edition of Plath's collected poems: "ARIEL. The name of a horse which she rode, at a riding school on Dartmoor, in Devonshire" (294). Alicia Ostriker speculates that the poem is about masturbation (105), and Janice Markey asserts that it concerns "a lesbian experience" (58).

full sense of the richest kind of encompassment of life) with its opposite, death's nothingness" (74). In fact, however, Plath is not conflating **two** opposing states of being; instead she is capering dangerously between metaphorical designs which seem to consume the poem from within. Obviously the movement of the poem is very powerful and very positive since the speaker proceeds from stillness and ignorance (**Sits** in darkness" [239]) toward light at a very rapid pace. The speaker moves with some potent force—a horse, a sexual partner, some aspect of herself—which compels her, and given the title and Plath's remarks concerning Auden, we can assume that this force must relate to some aspect of Plath's creative self. The speed of the journey is such that the earth "Splits and passes" before the speaker, and even those delicious and tempting enticements that come between the creator and her work are not enough to impede her; they may be "Black sweet blood mouthfuls," but the speaker of the poem consigns them to the category "Shadows," things which threaten the vision (light) and power of her creative surge.

The female force of the poem flies through air, and suddenly she begins to engage in that most essential of poetic acts—at least for the writers of Plath's generation; she removes those restrictions which threaten her gift. She **tosses** her clothing off like a rebellious Godiva **and rides** free, fast, unclothed, and fully herself toward her goal:

White
 Godiva, I **unpeel**—
 Dead hands, dead stringencies.
 (239)

And she reaches a moment of apparent transcendence: "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas." Her epiphany is associated with traditionally female symbols. (We might make a connection between the wheat and Demeter, goddess of agriculture, or between wheat and the mother earth. The sea, moreover, certainly seems closely connected with female cycles and with the female symbol of the moon.) Her moment of triumph, moreover, is conveyed in verbs which may suggest—if sexuality is at all to be considered appropriate here—female rather than male sexuality. To foam and to glitter have **arguably** much more resonance when considered in terms of female or-

gasm than in terms of male **orgasm**. The energy of these verbs is great, but it is a more **sonorous** and **sustained** energy than a directed, explosive, and aimed burst. To make use of Luce Irigaray's paradigm, woman's sexuality and woman's pleasure are not "one" but "plural" because "*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*" (28).

But now the speaker enters a different metaphorical paradigm. Her final "stringency" is removed, "The **child's cry** // Melts in the wall," and she can become more powerful only by moving her fully exposed (naked) female self toward the power which she so covets, the power of light and heat and vision—the sun. To make this journey she must transform herself **from** wheat and water to something much more dangerous and traditionally powerful—an arrow. And here Plath is forced—by the desire of her speaker to assert herself, to move and fly—to appropriate an inappropriate figure for her speaker's flight: the speaker of "Ariel" **becomes** an arrow. She transforms herself into the most potent **figure** of the patriarchal symbolic order—the phallus. The arrow is clearly a figure Plath associates, somewhat resentfully, with masculine power. In *The Bell Jar*, Buddy Willard's mother tells him that a man is "an **arrow** into the future" and that a woman needs to be "the place the arrow shoots off from" (79). Esther's **response** to Buddy's reiteration of Mrs. Willard's platitudes is that she, Esther, wants to be that arrow: "I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself" (92). In "Ariel," Plath demonstrates the consequences for the female artist of such proud and self-affirming desires when these desires are couched in the only symbolic structures available to her.

While the speaker of the poem may call herself the arrow, while she might arrogantly lay claim to that title, she is still female, still the wheat and the water, still naked and **exposed** and vulnerable. It is important to note that once the speaker begins her flight, she is no longer the arrow; her femaleness has ineluctably reasserted itself. Inescapably female, she is

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

(240)

And dew must be consumed by the power of the sun. The speaker of the poem is fully aware that her urgent desire for the power she has arrogated for herself is destructive to her as a woman, for she refers quite deliberately to her journey **as** suicidal. What is perhaps most tragic about both the speaker of this poem and about Sylvia Plath **as** the creator of that speaker is that the impulse toward self-disclosure, the desire **to** move toward the eye/I of awareness, is destined to destroy both of them. In Western culture the unclothed female, whether it be the self-disclosing creator or the emblematic and naked female subject, can be a **symbol** only of vulnerability and victimization, even when the audience to the glorious and hopeful unveiling is the self.

Placing "Ariel" in a feminist context, Sandra Gilbert argues that the "Eye" toward which this poem moves is "the eye of the father, the patriarchal superego which destroys and devours with a single glance" ("Fine, White Flying Myth" 259). But such a reading, by ignoring the play on words of "eye" and "I," leaves unremarked a central ambiguity in the poem and underestimates Plath's commitment to her female subject and her wild and creative commitment to her **own** art. The speaking subject here is not just moving toward a powerful male entity, the sun; Plath's speaker is moving **implosively** toward herself as well, toward the eye/I that has become the center of her universe, the focus of her attention. The tragedy of Plath's work, however, is that she has conceived of this overwhelmingly omnipotent figure in the only metaphors available to her—those of the masculine poetic tradition. In this tradition, power is the sun/God, as Gilbert has observed, and to be fully revealed before him, to be naked before this God, is the most transcendently powerful act a human can perform. But when you are female, when you burn with your own sun and expose yourself confidently to that sun, you are consumed. Your body, your self, is still vulnerable. It will be destroyed. The most telling irony of the poem is that the masculine **God** of patriarchal discourse has been displaced here by the "I" which is the speaker herself. And the female speaker has become the phallic arrow which **impels** itself toward that sun. But such a journey into knowledge will prove deadly—because the language, the signifiers of that journey dictate that it must be **so** for the speaking subject who is still "dew," still female. Even when the

father is replaced, his words speak for him, his language secures his position: the dew will be dispersed by the sun.

Clearly, the energies and anomalies of Plath's poetry can be related to her experiences as a poet who is also a woman. Sympathetic feminist critics, attempting to explain the tensions of a poem such as "Ariel," have seen Sylvia Plath as a victim of what Suzanne Juhasz calls "the double bind of the woman poet" (1): "Plath suffered in an extreme form from the woman artist's need to reconcile her two roles, woman and poet; from the necessity of living with what may seem her two selves" (88). Juhasz feels that Plath struggled in her poetry with this wrenching conflict but that she never resolved it, adding, "Her death. . . proves the impossibility of what she set out to do" (114). Paula Bennett refers as well to opposing forces in Plath's work when she asserts that Plath was troubled by "the conflict between the needs of her gender and the requirements of her genre" (*My Life* 99). While Bennett concludes that these internal conflicts finally destroyed Plath, Lynda Bundtzen, who also finds Plath's work indelibly marked by the tensions Plath felt as woman and writer, asserts that her best works represent a resolution of the conflicts she experienced between "her art and her life." Bundtzen goes on to observe that in her last poems Plath reimagines a world where she could live as a woman and an artist: "She translates social and psychological constraints on women into physical and sexual terms, so that we come to understand not only what it may feel like to live in a woman's body but also how this affects her inventive freedom and control of the world around her" (42). Bundtzen's more positive readings notwithstanding, the overwhelming force of most such studies seems to fall with those who find Plath endlessly conflicted in her creativity.

In his "biography of the imagination," *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, Steven Gould Axelrod offers a psychoanalytic approach to Plath which also foregrounds Plath's conflicts but which locates in her poetry a "cure"; this cure ultimately proves dangerous and destructive, failing Plath in the end. Axelrod addresses Plath's attempt to find her voice, her "battle for textual power," and he perceives that silence was Plath's enemy, that in her writing she

sought to restructure herself unproblematically in language: "Plath thought of 'voice' as a category in which her body could pass through language, generating a verbal form that constituted another self" (4). Axelrod is sensitive to Plath's conflicts as a female poet—she was, he observes, "committed to a male-dominated tradition that subjected her to a wide variety of exclusionary strategies" (81)—but he argues as well that Plath's poetry healed the breach that language effected: "composition was the one act in which she could diminish the otherness that oppressed her" (9). Axelrod asserts, moreover, that Plath located her "true self" (234) in her poetry and that this self, once it began to emerge, demanded Plath's sacrifice of all other aspects of herself to her gift: "Her desire had been to release the trapped being, the poet locked within her, and she had become a slave to that desire. She did not know how to give it up" (235).

In Axelrod's terms, this, then, is what destroyed Plath. Her desire to create had grown so overwhelming that it consumed her, but then "the monster began to expire"; she began to find that her gift was failing her: "As Plath ran out of pretext or out of language, as her verbal constitution of self reached its limit and then withdrew, the potential space of her texts attenuated" (235). Since the "true self" which Plath had created in her poetry was deserting her, she turned to her "empirical self" to relieve her alienation. In so doing, Plath was forced, asserts Axelrod, to re-create this empirical self in the shape of the poetic self which had absorbed her so passionately. This re-creation proved tragic: "Plath tried to reinvest her empirical self with desire by making it double the same myth she had evoked in her poetry: that of death and rebirth. . . . In a sense her poetic voice had not weakened and died at all, but had captured her person. . . , if Plath's poetry initially seemed to be saving her life, it ended by consuming her" (236).

While his arguments are passionate and sensitive, Axelrod seems to have left a significant aspect of Plath's involvement with language out of his consideration. Although he asserts that Plath's poetic play involved her "troping along the border of body and text" (22), and although he devotes his entire volume to the difficulties Plath faced as a female poet, Axelrod does not examine the ways in which the fact that her body is a female body necessarily

and wrenchingly shapes, even **distorts**, the movement between body and text. While he acknowledges that Plath's relationship to patriarchal power was problematic ("She martyred herself to patriarchal tradition and rebelled against it; revered men's texts and defaced them; was inhibited by selfdoubt and plotted to invent a language of her own" [24]), and while he asserts that "she wrote in male metaphors, which she increasingly sought to undermine or to explode" (32), Axelrod still **sees** Plath as moving toward some authentic language, some act of creation powerful enough for her to locate *herself* in that act. In fact, in a discussion of her veneration of the male models after whom she fashioned herself, Axelrod asserts that "Plath gained control over literary language through a process of antithetical substitution. . . . Plath **revived** the words of her male predecessors in order to transfuse them with her own antithetical ardor" (75). For Plath, then, language itself was not problematic in Axelrod's terms—she could "gain control" over it; only her relationship to language created difficulties, which she struggled with and at times overcame but to which she ultimately succumbed. Thus Axelrod observes that Plath turned to her "empirical" self, but he does not add that any **turn** to that self, that physical presence, would have been shaped **by** a language which, without Plath's consent, represented that bodily entity in **terms** which were not Plath's own. Language would render **the female self**—or its emblem in the confessional mode, the unclad female body—inadequate, powerless, vulnerable.

Axelrod's presentation of his material **also** tends to conflate and **obscure** the difficulties **inherent** in a woman's **use** of language which, I argue here, were at the **source** of Plath's struggles as a poet. Axelrod discusses Plath's situation, her words, and her **poetic** strategies in terms of other writers—frequently male writers—without commenting upon the possibility that Plath and a male writer may not be using language in the same way. What is especially difficult about the formulation of such comparisons is that Axelrod simply allows the words of a male writer to stand in for the experiences of Plath, for her words, without noting the differences between male and female representations that he may **be** suppressing. In effect, Axelrod engages in the same **sort** of "substitution" of another writer's words or **tropes** which he **says** Plath employs. Such juxta-

positions occur throughout the **book** and include implied and stated comparisons between Plath and such writers as Robert Lowell (12–13, 68–70), E. Scott Fitzgerald (232), Walt Whitman (234), and Theodore Roethke (68–70). In fact, Axelrod concludes his work with just such a problematic linking of the words of Herman Melville with the creative and personal struggles of Sylvia Plath "perhaps Plath was not simply a victim. When she saw herself trapped in a true self grown increasingly alien, she may have decided to 'thrust through the wall' of her prison, as Ahab says (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 144). She may have intended to strike 'through the mask' by giving meaning and validity to her empirical self" (235–36). Before asserting the appropriateness to Plath of **such** acts as thrusting, such rebellions as bursting the walls of one's prison, one must investigate how the femaleness of the speaking subject may reshape or redirect these words.

Curiously, despite the sympathy and intelligence these readers bring to bear in their respective studies of Plath, they tend to situate the source of the wildly erratic and ultimately disruptive energies of Plath's poetry within Plath herself. Each tries to explain Plath's work in terms of Plath's conflicts, and while most would argue that Plath had little control over the creative and personal struggles she faced, it is important to note that to assert conflict is, of necessity, to suggest the possibility of resolution. To locate the site of conflict within the individual—even within the individual as that individual is embedded in a hostile social structure—is by implication to locate the site of resolution within that individual **as** well. Such readings seem to imply that Plath—had she had world enough and time—might have been able to contend with the violent energies of her poetry and her life, that—had she held on just a bit longer through that last, awful winter—she, too, could have tasted the spring, and her gift would not have been **so** tragically lost. Such readings suggest, moreover, that in a kinder, **more** tolerant world—one which validated a woman's right to speak—Plath would have thrived.

In fact, openly placing the responsibility for Plath's conflicts solely upon Plath herself, Bennett remarks that "In committing herself both privately and publicly to an image that was utterly alien to her real needs, Plath had in effect set herself up" (123). Bennett goes or

to assert that Plath obsessively and self-destructively *tried* to shape herself to the demands of others: "To the world, . . . Plath was relentlessly the good girl" (120). In fact, if we **are** to take Plath's biographers at their word, Plath was not at **all** a "good girl," nor did she feel constrained by many of the restrictions of her era: she took lover after lover; she competed intensely with her husband; at least twice, she went **so** far as to destroy **his** work in progress; and she was hostile to friends and family.¹⁸ I am not suggesting here that

18. There have, to this point, been five widely differing biographies of Plath, and one of Plath's more recent biographers, Ronald Hayman (*The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*), observes that any work on Plath's life **has** been deeply **compromised by** Ted and Olwyn Hughes's control over the Plath materials (206). (I have not included among these five Steven Could Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* since his book **focuses** more heavily upon Plath's works than upon her life; it is, as Axelrod puts it, a "biography of the imagination.")

Edward Butscher, who did not have access to Plath's published letters, journals, or collected poems or to the major collections of Plath materials at Smith College or Indiana University, bases his *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* primarily upon interviews and upon his reading of Plath's poetry. According to Hayman, Butscher was asked by Olwyn Hughes to delete certain materials from his work, but he refused to do so and published against her wishes (Hayman 207). Butscher finds Plath's negative energies overwhelming and **refers** to Plath as a 'bitch goddess' throughout his work. Linda Wagner-Martin, who was also aggressively **pressured by** the Hugheses to **reshape** and delete certain materials (Hayman 207), takes a more sympathetic, feminist **view** of Plath but nevertheless reveals many of Plath's infidelities, **rages**, and resentments. In fact, Hayman quotes Olwyn Hughes as labeling Wagner-Martin's work a "Plath-as-the-libbers-wish-to-icônise-her" version of her life (Hayman 208). **Finally** Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* is most caustic about Plath's purported cruelties, perhaps because Stevenson was aided more fully by the Hughes family than **were** Butscher or Wagner-Martin. Stevenson even admits that her biography is **so** controlled by Olwyn Hughes as to be almost a work of dual authorship" (Stevenson ix). See Harold Fromm's essay for a revealing comparison of the biographies by Butscher, Wagner-Martin, and Stevenson. Perhaps a caveat is in order here: while **Fromm** is quite **useful** in providing a historical context for these three biographies, his attitude toward Plath is inappropriately **harsh**.

The two more recent biographies, **Hayman's** *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* and Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*, bypass, **as reviewer** Emily Leider puts it, Hughes and his powerful control **over** Plath's life and works by choosing not to quote extensively from Plath's work" (8). Unfortunately, **both** Hayman's and Alexander's works leave one unsatisfied, with the sense that **so** much **has** been left out, elided, glossed **over**, that Plath remains mysterious and elusive. Nevertheless, neither Alexander nor Hayman flinches before Plath's abusiveness and assertiveness, and **both** these biographies present, **if** not new material, **fresh** and innovative **perspectives** on Plath. Given the recent **furor** **over** the **use** Diane Middlebrook made of Anne Sexton's tapes of sessions with her psychiatrist, the Alexander biography is noteworthy **because** he, **too**, interviewed and quoted his subject's therapist, **Dr.** Ruth Barnhouse (Simpson 92).

Plath be damned for her behavior but rather **that we should not be** taken in by her professions—such as those in her letters to her mother—of conventionality or by her intermittent yearnings in that direction.

Perhaps the source of Plath's conflicts lay not in her personal life, not in her ambivalences about her femininity and her creativity, not in her search for an appropriate role or life or mate, not even in a society which proved hostile to her creative efforts, but rather in the very language she used to confront these conflicts. With respect to the symbolic order and Plath's uneasy place in that order, Margaret Homans offers much insight. In *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Homans takes up the problem of the woman writer confronted with a "major literary tradition [which] normatively identifies the figure of poet **as** masculine, and voice **as** a masculine property" (3). Homans demonstrates the ways in which women poets of the nineteenth century sought a redefinition of creativity and a position from which to create, to exist **as speaking, writing subjects, not as objects of representation so** that "hierarchy in language might be undone" (40). Homans deviates, however, from those who see the problem of the woman poet as a conflict in roles or needs, for Homans locates the difficulties of creativity within language itself, and she **goes** so far as to say that the hostility of language to the woman poet may be immutable. Homans asserts that ultimately the necessarily hierarchical dualities of language may have to be retained, that "to speak without a mask is an impossibility, for men and for women, where all language is a mask" (40). Thus she argues that the language that **seems** to impose the dualities which preclude women from authorship, from poetic power, "might be undone in other ways than by denying otherness, and both the means and the motive to do **so** rest, if anywhere, with the feminine imagination" (40). Language may be challenged, undermined, but not changed.

In her concluding arguments, Homans considers women writers of the twentieth century, Plath among them, and she cautions against readers who equate the "I" in contemporary poetry by women with the **poets** themselves, an admonition especially appropriate to a writer considered to be one of the confessional poets. Homans **goes** on to say that **such** readings cause us to misunderstand Sylvia Plath's work "This reading of Plath is unfair to the woman and, by calling it

merely unmediated self-expression, **obscures** her **poetry's** real power." Homans points out that the **"poetry's** self-destructive violence" did not necessarily imply or **necessitate** a violence against Plath herself, that her death was not "the purposeful completion of her poetry's project." Rather, Homans **says**, "the imagery of violence is part of a symmetrical figurative **system**, and death is figured as a way of achieving rebirth or some other transcendence" (219). Homans quite perceptively **points** to the figurative system itself, then, as Plath's source of **conflict**, but she **asserts** that Plath is able to overcome this system by embracing and ultimately transcending it.

Despite her insistence that there is some triumph in Plath's resistance to the literalization, objectification, and appropriation that the female voice of her **poetry** endures, Homans admits that frequently the **poetry** foregrounds the most negative aspects of **this** transcendental leap: "And as always, it is the process of objectification that makes up the poem, not the final, scarcely **articulable** transcendence" (220). Homans argues that "for the women in Plath's poems the danger is that by provisionally accepting the old equation of woman and object in order to **destroy** it, they destroy themselves in the process" (221-22). The notion of transcendence must be carefully examined when we discuss language, since to transcend language would imply a movement beyond language. Because Plath is engaged in writing, since she immerses herself in the figurative system which threatens her **own** representation of the female within that system, it **seem** doubtful that she can, in fact, "transcend" this system. To what location would she move? We must wonder, further, whether Plath had a choice; **perhaps** the old equation of woman as object was simply imposed upon **her**. Rather than accepting a figurative system and struggling **to** overcome it **from within**, or rather than struggling within that system and leaping beyond it, it may be that Plath was forced to employ **a** figurative **system** which undermined her **own** efforts to find a voice at **all**. It may be that she was trapped within a system she could neither manage nor elude. Homans implies that Plath made choices and enjoyed creative **liberties** which may not really have **been choices or liberties at all**. **For Plath does** not seem **so** much to **accept the objectification of woman in order to combat it** as she seems to resist that objectification while simultaneously inscribing it as she uses the very language which encodes it.

While Homans shifts the site of Plath's conflicts from Plath herself to the language which Plath used, her argument ultimately asserts that Plath's success lies somehow beyond language, in some moment of transcendence. I would argue instead that Plath was held fast by the language which undid her. Plath was shaped and ultimately undone—as was her poetry—by forces she could never surmount, for she existed and wrote within a language that was not her own, within, to use Luce Irigaray's words, a "sexual imaginary" where "woman . . . is only a more or **less** obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (25). In Irigaray's paradigm, there remains some potential for female power in the fact that woman cannot be adequately conceptualized by the symbolic order of our language: "She resists all adequate definition. Further, she has no 'proper' name" (26); she is "not one."

But for Plath, this positioning of her creative self would never have been enough; such marginalization would have forced her to the edges of the tradition to which she aspired, in which she vainly sought a prominent, respected place. The "feminine burling" (*Journals* 70) that Plath **so** despised may be read as the language of such marginalization, since it is language produced only by those who find themselves thrust from the more potent center of the traditional discourse by means of which the "real" artist could make his name. And Plath yearned to speak her name, to mark her "I" indelibly, aggressively, masculinely—as she conceived it—upon her page: we remember that "painful botched rape of the first page" (*Journals* 161). She sought to bare with power the body and the self from which she wrote, and yet she could not, because, in terms of the symbolic order in which she operated, that body was not an emblem of power, and consequently that self was not permitted to speak. In Irigaray's words again, "The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself" (30).

In fact, Plath seems to have chosen a genre which required her to immerse herself in **a symbolic** order set quite nearly in stone. To make matters worse **Plath's chosen** idols in all her writings were, **as we have seen, men, writers most deeply committed to that symbolic**

order which would silence Plath, which would push her back to her body, to her femaleness, to her literalness.¹⁹ Thus the moment Plath offered her body—her literal, real woman's body—the moment she moved toward her own physical self, she was forced into a figurative system which devalued that body as a representation of her self, of her power.

Despite her attempts to appropriate the powerful tropes of this symbolic order to her own ends, Sylvia Plath could not elude the language which shaped her and which constructed her femaleness as vulnerability. She inherited a system of images, metaphors, figures, words that did not reflect her own bodily reality; she spoke and lived and surrounded herself with a language that offered her the shape of human experience in terms that were not her own. She was a woman writer whose metaphorical heritage taught her to view creativity as a masculine activity, whose very language shaped the valuable self as the masculine self. And yet she lived in a body the vulnerabilities of which that language—and, indeed, that world—would violate. Math did, indeed, write her body; she sought fervently to ground her poetry in the literal, the physical of her own being, to unclothe the body which represented her self, but in doing so she exposed that body—and its accompanying representations in poetry—to a view of creativity and femininity which dictated that that body be demeaned and finally destroyed.

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19. Homans does not consider Plath in her more recent and certainly more problematic work, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*, but her provocative conclusions may be used to shed light on Plath's difficulty in dealing with the figurative system she employed in writing poetry. Superimposing the work of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow upon the theories of subjectivity and representation of Jacques Lacan, Homans asserts that, in terms of the cultural myths Lacan articulates, "the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and of culture" (2). Homans goes on to argue that the woman writer has found herself inevitably dealing with this "profoundly troubling myth" (2), for by virtue of this myth, women are . . . identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language" (4), and while "the literal is associated with the feminine, the more highly valued figurative is associated with the masculine" (5). In her careful explication and use of Chodorow's object-station theory of female development, Homans amends and reshapes Lacan's views, demonstrating that while woman might be associated with the literal, she also participates in the symbolic, but differently than man.

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