Aspects of Identity: Poet, Persona and Performance in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

By

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DECLARATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in

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I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other university.

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ABSTRACT

Female identity in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* collection (first published in 1965) is a complex site of being and becoming within a 1950s culture of performance. From a twenty-first century perspective, this dissertation bridges traditional and contemporary readings of Plath and the Plath archive through a referencing of motifs such as celebrity, 'the gaze', ventriloquism and clothing. The inter-discursive approach used – literary, psychoanalytic, cultural – attempts to underline the ongoing significance of Plath's place as a woman poet in literary studies.

Keywords: 1950s; identity; performance; women's poetry; confessional poetry; the archive

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INTRODUCTION

It is the unflinching bravado of Sylvia Plath's writing that first caught my attention. Distinct for its ability to cross cultural genres, Plath's poetry has influenced the work of playwrights, filmmakers, composers, choreographers and musicians, as well as a spectrum of other writers. There has been a major revitalisation of Plath studies since the publication, in 2000, of Plath's journals and, in 2004, of the restored *Ariel*. One consequence, as Anita Helle observes, is that "Plath scholars have recently been finding their way around the impasse of woman as death by returning to the archive to consider an abundance of new material from fresh critical perspectives" (2005:633). Further, these "preoccupations with 'evidence' are not solely a return to the 'thing', the artefact as object, as much as a turn towards a consciousness of history and method, a critical awareness of the politics of knowledge that have materially and discursively framed Plath's legacy" (Helle 2005:633).

In conjunction with selected poems from her other collections – *The Colossus* (1967), *Crossing the Water* (1971), and *Winter Trees* (1975) – I have chosen to focus on Plath's (in)famous *Ariel* (originally published in 1965), so as to deconstruct the 'Plath myth' from what could be construed as the site of its creation[1]. In *Ariel*, as in her earlier collections, Plath probes the *topoi* of history, introspection and self-reflexivity, yet employs a heightened theatricality "that seems new and indeed unprecedented" (Axelrod 2006:80) and extremely unsettling. It is this that I intend to consider. My work on *Ariel* will not rehearse the scope (or the judgmental moralising) of Lynda K. Bundtzen's *The Other Ariel* (2001), which is at any rate a *book-length* comparison of the two versions of Plath's final poetry manuscript. Instead, I will be guided by the recognition that "[e]merging from renewed interest in Plath studies", for instance, "is a greater emphasis on and appreciation of interdisciplinary and cross-genre ramifications, as well as bold reformulations of the public and private forces that have shaped Plath's legacy as a 'confessional' writer" (Helle 2005:633). It is in terms of such complex critical enquiry that I intend to consider Plath's *Ariel* – a volume which, according to new archival research, cannot insistently be understood as an idiosyncratic record of a gifted woman's psychological instability, but taps extra-poetically into "the irreducible center of public life" (Von Hallberg 1985:4).

As a woman in the twenty-first century, I will approach Plath's poetry from the perspective of someone living in a world where the concept of identity is being significantly redefined. The contemporary 'striptease culture' (McNair 2002), for example, is one of explicit self-exposure in which the public/private boundaries collapse, and questions of

agency and subjection are difficult to situate. Here, for instance, I will be bound to address scholarship which has sought to annex Plath to a feminist project, for as Helle argues, "Plath and her identities still do not conform to any monocular feminist lens". In many ways, the fragmented self I will discuss in relation to the *Ariel* poems reflects the impasse of a critical discourse that has, in Helle's words, "broken down along a number of lines" (2005:640). With this in mind, I will not only conceptualise Plath's poetry in relation to a number of fairly traditional tropes (among them 'mask', 'gaze', and 'ventriloquism') but place these against more contemporary analytical concepts such as 'the archive', and 'the performative'. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the significance of both conventional and contemporary tropes as they bear upon Plath's mediated female identity.

Further, in some regard, as current Plath scholarship is suggesting, the new millennium retrains a critical spotlight on issues of privacy and surveillance that pervaded North American Cold War poetry of the 1950s. In this climate, where acceding to comfortable conformity was the norm, Plath's *Ariel* poems push to the limit some of the experiential and stylistic risks associated with 'self' and 'exposure'. Peter Childs, for example, proposes that Plath's suffering is "tied up in her poetry" with "postwar issues of anonymity", "the relationship between the individual and the mass-produced, the ownership of bodies and the production of identities" (1999:64).

Here, instead of simply trying to align Plath's 'confessionalism' with feminist readings of women's writing, my research will affiliate with recent revisions of the term. Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2002), for instance, broadens rather limiting early studies of the mode by C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones (1964), and Alfred Alvarez (1968). In particular, I support Nelson's theory that 'confessionalism' – the "most secret, damaging and disruptive elements of private life on display" – arose as a counter-discourse to the official ideologies of privacy and surveillance during the Cold War (2006:23). A particularly interesting study is Christina Britzolakis' *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (2002), a text which posits the notion that Plath *stages* her confessions. Clearly, new scholarship presents a fascinating opportunity for me to engage with the *Ariel* poems through the unstable zone where privacy meets what Helle calls the "shifting borders of identity" (2005:636).

Overall, I intend to investigate the possibilities and limitations which arise when a reader attempts to bridge traditional and current takes on Plath, and I will argue that the *Ariel* poems attest to the complex sites of being and becoming which inflect the identity[2] of the middle class American woman poet in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Historical context is

important in this regard. The tension between Plath's ambition to be a successful poet *and* the perfect daughter, wife and mother, among other roles, is inextricably bound to the hypocrisies of her era – "an age which for a long time refused to acknowledge the end of the kind of brave-face mask of cheerful wholeness in the aftermath of two World Wars" (Lim 1997:41). Socioculturally significant, the *Ariel* poems are explosive in that they confront the sexual double standards and societal expectations which the Eisenhower era imposed on women. As Janet Malcolm explains, the history of Plath's life

> is a signature story of the fearful, double-faced fifties. Plath embodies in a vivid, almost emblematic way the schizoid character of the period. She is the divided self par excellence. The taut realism of the late poems and the slack, girls'-book realism of her life ... are grotesquely incongruous. The photographs of Plath as a vacuous girl of the fifties, with dark lipstick and blond hair, add to one's sense of the jarring disparity between the life and the work. (1993:89)

As a corollary, Plath displays an acute awareness, in numerous settings, of playing various roles before different audiences.

This multiple role playing is complicated by her identity as a poet – a role which leads her to focus on self-representation in a way that is personal and highly individual. Writing is, after all, a profession that is "imagined as a process of becoming aimed at total self-realization, which Plath understood as the achievement of a heightened, intensified, permanent 'life' (Plath's word, which she uses repeatedly)" (Hammer 2001:67). On this note, I will endeavour to answer the following questions: how are protean, multiple identities – from the perspective of the 1950s woman poet – conceptualised in *Ariel*? Further, how are these identities influenced by Plath's psychobiography and western cultural discourses, and how are they unstable and enigmatic, defying straightforward assessment? While it is true that other scholars (Sandra Lim and Susan R. Van Dyne, for example) have examined Plath's representation of the protean self, my objective is to re-frame this investigation by placing the literary texts firmly and, I imagine, resonantly, in conjunction with more non-literary contexts and materials. Helle maintains:

> Lines between the 'strictly literary' and the cultural have blurred in recent years, rendering the relationship of literature to periodical culture, political culture, and popular culture increasingly relevant. Archive material is thus not strictly or always intended to refer to Plath's archive alone. (2007:11)

In such terms, I will attempt to show how Plath uses her poetry variously to bridge *and* to extend the gap between the 'artistic' and 'commercial', for as Britzolakis (2006) elucidates, Plath's later poems unsettle the cultural hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' art. My point, here, will be to demonstrate that popular cultural discourses are just as crucial as psychobiography in both the construction and deconstruction of the 'Plath myth'. I will also discuss how Plath uses and reworks binaries such as public/private, reality/illusion, male/female, subject(ivity)/object(ivity), concealing/revealing, emotion/detachment, actor/observer, manipulated/manipulator, and embodied/disembodied. Tied to her poetic exploration of these pairings is Plath's reiteration and revision of the dominant popular discourses available to her, namely, representations of femaleness and femininity encoded by the socially hegemonic 'male gaze' in such diverse contexts as women's magazines (*Mademoiselle*, *Vogue, Seventeen*, and the *Ladies Home Journal*), and more literary-cultural journals (the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*).

In imagining a more flexible 'Plath archive' (my choice of verb, here, deliberately reminding the reader of this dissertation of Helle's point that bodies of research are made even while they may seem manifestly material), I will take account of both influential critical scholarship on Plath alongside more popular, web-based resources. In effect, I will consider 'the archive' to be a transactional process which gives rise to an elusive, provisional product, rather than some traditional 'body of work' which is synonymous with Plath's published poetry. In this respect, my project, while comparatively small in scope given its focus on *Ariel*, is nevertheless influenced by major theorists of current American poetry such as Jed Rasula, who in his theorising of online poetry resources in relation to traditional canons observes that "the Internet is not a docile medium, and it will not readily support a category like 'American poetry' except as a quaint historical cipher" (2009:12). Similarly, in responding to *Ariel* via a route that acknowledges both academic and popular discourses – a link conspicuously absent in previous critical studies (*vide* Wagner 1988) – I will somewhat audaciously propose as valid an approach to Plath which situates the writer as firmly within celebrity culture as within literary, poetic lineages. I envisage – like Helle and Marsha Bryant, for instance – that such an approach will usefully enable me to overcome somewhat dichotomous tendencies in Plath studies which privilege either 'the poems' or 'the poet', the 'literature' or 'the life'.

I hope to complicate standard debates premised on reductive paradigms in which Plath's writerly identity is considered to be 'hysterical' (*vide* Alvarez and Yezzi in Bryant 2002). Instead, I will show that it is difficult to place Plath and her work, so resistant are they

to being defined according to any essentialised views. With this in mind, my intention is to conceptualise Plath's lived identities and those personae in *Ariel* as layered psychosocial and/or artistic identities. Ted Hughes has commented, for example, that "Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings" (1982:xii), while Cath Stowers asserts that Plath "tries on several provisional and often contradictory guises to flaunt the mutable nature of her body and consciousness, cultivating various poses and positions from which to speak" (1997:161). I believe that the ambiguities of the *Ariel* poems, and Plath herself, are such that the distinctions between poet and speaker are hazy at best. As such, I will have to negotiate a difficult path between: biographical scholarship on Plath which – erroneously, I believe – conflates poet and speaker (see, for instance, the rebuke levelled at scholars by Alexandra Yurkovsky, 2003); research which – again mistakenly – elevates the poetic text to uncluttered New Critical artefact (*vide* Gill 2006); and more theorised responses (*vide* Rose, Helle, Bryant) which take cognizance of theoretical understandings that however much an 'I' purports to summon 'self', 'I' is simultaneously a figure that is disabled from speaking in some authentic 'own' voice; "'voice' is from the start borrowed from elsewhere" (Butler 1997:198).

While I will obviously have to address some of the older Plath studies (see References), I will draw especially on Laura Mulvey's gaze theory (1989) and Judith Butler's material on the 'performative' as explored in *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993). The recent *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (2006) is of additional interest to me, as the editor, Jo Gill, acknowledges the interplay between the psychological and the cultural, and offers a succinct summary of the status of current Plath scholarship. In particular, I will also consult *The Unraveling Archive*, a 2007 collection of essays on Sylvia Plath edited by Helle, and two articles by Bryant entitled "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising" (2002) and "IMAX Authorship: Teaching Plath and Her Unabridged Journals" (2004). In addition, I propose to offer a reading practice that in Van Dyne's words honours the subconscious as "an integral element of subjectivity and of narration" (2006:18), a reading that critical scholarship desperately needs.

Informed by Britzolakis' statement that "The *Ariel* voice seems to trope a return of the repressed, at both the personal and the political level" (2006:107), my study will where necessary draw on Jungian psychoanalytic theories of the ego and alter ego – in effect, the public/private dialectic rooted in the notion of multiple role-playing. I intend to make loose use of such theory, as my aim is to avoid an assessment of Plath's work which either upholds the contrived binary logic that prevails in the work of, for example, Anne Stevenson (*Bitter*

Fame 1989), or p(l)athologises it. (Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* [1976] and David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* [1976] are two cases in point.) With this in mind, I will also draw on more progressive psychoanalytic critical discourse such as Jacqueline Rose's influential *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) and Britzolakis' *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Both focus on the slipperiness of language, the indeterminacy of the subject, and the uncertainty of truth – all of which are integral to my study.

In chapter one, "Celebrity", I will draw on Bryant's research into "IMAX Authorship" (2004) with regard to the discursive formulation of 'Sylvia Plath' as a literary celebrity or larger-than-life authorial phenomenon. (Helen Dudar, Janet Badia, and Carol Bere make similar allusions to the celebrity-like iconicity of Plath and *Ariel*.) Helle maintains: "If Plath scholars have sometimes labored under the burden of the cultural obsession with Plath the high-voltage, sensational female spectacle, there is also much to learn from the desires and discourses that mediate attachment to the myth" (2005:651). Taking this statement into consideration, I aim to debunk the biographical sensationalism associated with the 'Plath myth', and to refocus attention on the significant achievements of her poetry. Through a referencing of 'celebrity' motifs, I hope to substantiate the argument that the *Ariel* poems represent femaleness through dramatic images of "hyper-self-assertion which refuse and deflate any essential, unitary self-hood" (Stowers 1997:156).

More importantly, I will consider how the *Ariel* poems, selected others, and their author both reinforce and resist the concept of façade related to the world of celebrity – a world which aggrandises the inflated ego and, in many ways, demands a paradoxical renunciation of individuality. Rose, who sees Plath as a ghost or spectral 'other body' who haunts our cultural consciousness, asks "what her writing, and responses to it, might reveal about fantasy as such" (1991:5). In conjunction with Bryant's article, I will utilise Rose's fairly recent work on celebrity culture in *On Not Being Able to Sleep* (2003), as well as articles by Kathleen M. Helal (2004), Elisabeth Bronfen (2001), Anne Shifrer (2001) and Mercè Cuenca (2009) which, although not all directly related to Plath, provide keen insight into the phenomenon of celebrity culture and literature. Chapter one will provide the impetus for the deconstruction of the public/private and academic/popular binaries which occupy a central role in the chapters that follow.

Entitled "Assuming the Position", chapter two will be informed primarily by Mulvey's gaze theory, and bears on the motif, recurrent in *Ariel*, of the sexualised female body as a trope in pornographic film and erotica. Of particular significance is the tension between a

predominantly contained sexuality in the 1950s and Plath's literary exhibitionism, as well as a subject/object interplay based on Cold War notions of surveillance and the eye as a cinematic camera lens. I wish to complicate standard readings of 'the female gaze' and, by extension, the female spectacle, while acknowledging the value of theoretical work by Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan (1983 and 1984), for instance. In aiming for a more progressive deployment of 'the female gaze', I hope to provide a challenge to Kaplan's (1983) claim that the female character can possess the look or make the male character the object of her gaze, but that her desire has no power. Butler's theory of gender performativity provides an additional theoretical framework for chapter two, as Plath and her personae frequently rehearse (and undermine) hegemonic, heterosexual gender conventions, thereby modelling or enacting various socially-constructed gender roles with the effect that a new material 'reality' is created. In Butler's terms:

> [G]ender cannot be understood as a 'role' which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self', whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act', broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. (1988:8)

Both Butler and Plath propose "an openness to resignification and recontextualization" of female identity (Butler 1999:176). Butler states that the illusion of the gender act is "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (1999:173). Further, using the concept of Plath's literary eye/I, I aim to challenge Paula Bennett's statement concerning Plath's "unambiguous […] heterosexual[ity]" as a woman poet (1990:109). I will argue that many of *Ariel*'s characters are viewed with an androgynous lens through which Plath challenges patriarchal discourse, offering readers complex, contradictory images of – and possibilities for – female identity.

In chapter three, "Body, Voice and Ventriloquism", I will place Plath's *oeuvre* in the context of ventriloquist acts, destabilising the binaries of public/private, puppet/puppeteer, and actor/observer – roles which speak to the double-consciousness and manipulated/manipulator dichotomy of Plath's actuality. I will also discuss Plath's experimentation with the motif of ventriloquism or the 'disembodied voice'. Examining vocal aberrations tied to technology such as the radio and telephone, I hope to illustrate her traversal of the boundaries between the body and language, as well as her use of disparate voices to articulate her conceptualisation of her fragmented personae. I also intend to refute

critical claims concerning Plath's supposed lack of emotional control or the 'formless' "maelstrom of female angst", an opinion common among male critics (*vide* Kenner and Spender in Shulkes 2005, for example). I will show how allusions to puppetry and ventriloquism enable Plath very purposefully to mediate personae, reconfiguring rather than conforming to the orthodox notion of the confessional mode as a formless outpouring of emotion. To substantiate, I will draw on Britzolakis' (2002) theory of a 'doubled discourse' which posits the psychic as a theatrical space in which Plath's self-reflexivity facilitates the acting out of the repressed. This entails an interplay of metaphor and sound, and of the analogical and the oral dimensions of poetic voice. According to Sally Bayley, seeing and hearing were "vital components in a [1950s] culture forced into confession" (2009:556). In such a charged context, I argue, it is flawed to imagine Plath's poetry as mere personal confession.

In the final chapter, "Clothing", attention will be paid to how Plath is able to (re)fashion 'identity' through clothes. Dress occupies a prominent role in many of the *Ariel* poems and I consider how this fashions and inscribes a cross-dressing between the 'academic' and the 'popular'. In particular, Plath's publications in various fashion magazines (*Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*) attest to the inter-disciplinary genres of fashion and literature and the integration of glamour and intelligence – often considered incompatible traits for the 1950s woman. In some ways, this chapter extrapolates from chapter two in that the dressed/undressed and public/private binaries are once again subject to deconstruction, yet this time using studies on clothing and cosmetics such as work by Angela McRobbie (1989), Garry M. Leonard (1992), and Jennifer Craik (1994).

Finally, I believe that through an inter-discursive approach which utilises a variety of cultural tropes or an amalgam of literary, psychoanalytic[3] and cultural discourses, I can produce a view onto and into Plath poetry that is geared towards the contemporary. Countless rewards are to be gained in revisiting the work of a woman poet who has left such a profound mark on contemporary poetry.

CHAPTER ONE: CELEBRITY

"[P]laying Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder, a game of 'chicken', the wheels of both cars locked and unable to swerve" (1999:viii) – this is how Robert Lowell describes Plath's compelling poetry collection *Ariel*, a view that has continued to find purchase across diverse contexts. In "IMAX Authorship" (2004), for example, Bryant discusses the 'Plath myth' as a popular and scholarly focus on the 'glittering' iconicity of *Ariel* and Plath's spotlighted personhood or monolithic authorial 'I', a 'larger-than-life' persona which has left its mark on popular and literary cultures alike[4]. Together with Christine Jeff's film *Sylvia* (2003) and Ryan Adams' song "Sylvia Plath" (2002), for instance, the 'Plath myth' has been fuelled by the publication of extracts from the *Unabridged Journals* (2000b) in magazines as diverse as *People Weekly*, *Vogue* and the *New Yorker*, as well as by the fan-club atmosphere which surrounds, and offers for popular consumption, Plath's cult novel *The Bell Jar* (1966). It may be that the biographically sensational has been crucial to Plath's staying power, but this focus also suggests a superimposition of prejudgment over aestheticism, personal life over the literary artefact. What, then, is a contemporary critic in a celebrity-obsessed world to do with Plath – and with her powerful poetry?

Using the motif of celebrity as a starting point, this chapter seeks to complicate the mediatised Plath myth rather than presuppose that a real Sylvia Plath authenticates her poetry for the public and literary critics. As one of Bryant's students proposes, "making Plath 'human' does not necessarily negate the myth or ground her helplessly in dull human life" (2004:256). Here, it is worth mentioning that the poems on which I comment emerge from a 1950s period of "unprecedented fascination with celebrity" or image culture in America (Helal 2004:78). This star system of visibility was one model of aspiration for Plath; another was intellectual glamour, evinced most notably by the Brahmin poets. As a woman poet who, above all else, "desired fame" (Rose 1992:3), Plath found herself in a bind typical of that which John Cawelti (1977) points out as unique to twentieth-century culture: the bridging of the gap between celebrity and literature. Consider the following excerpt from the *Journals* in which Plath admits, "I am jealous of those who think more deeply, who write better ... who look better, who live better, who love better than I" (2000a:34). In Plath's case, the femaleness of the appealing star image as aspiration clashes with the male authority connoted by way of the equally sparkling, equally marketable written word.

Defined by Rose as "the most public form of late twentieth-century self-fashioning" (2003:3), celebrity as a popular cultural discourse in Plath's life and texts denotes an attempt both to fashion her 'self' and to deconstruct this popularly-informed construction along Butlerian lines (Butler 1999). In exploring this, I hope to illustrate a paradox: how *Ariel* and its author employ an 'Alice in Wonderland' perceptual logic in that 'identity', from the woman poet's perspective, is mediated both by the premise of a super-sized 'IMAX authorship' suggested by Bryant and, secondly, by Rose's and Roland Barthes' postmodern foreseeing of "the Author [the paper-*I*] diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage" (1988:145). Based on this oscillation, Plath's 'celebrity' poems are informed by her contestation of the academic/popular, public/private, male/female, and reality/illusion binaries.

To cite an example of the ambiguity tied to these pairings: Bryant considers the cover photograph of the *Unabridged Journals* (Anchor Books edition): is Plath's "meaningful glance" to her suitor a public performance or a private gesture of pleasure? Does it represent 'Plath the person' or 'Plath the myth?' These multiple possibilities attest to the futility of "using the author's photograph as guarantor of a text's truth and authenticity" (Bryant 2004:246), and also to the attempt to impose diagnostic grids over Plath's elusive work. This challenge is reiterated in Plath's occupying of "an ever shifting space of public intimacy" (Bryant 2004:254) through her revelation of 'private' secrets or occlusions, on a personal and/or sociocultural level, in her poetry as well as in *Letters Home* (1992) and the *Journals*. One cannot, however, detach these disclosures from the scaffolding of a celebrity culture of perpetual illusion and public-address, for as Bronfen (2001) states, confessional texts *perform* this very culture of attention or the obsession with getting noticed. In this regard, the staged intimacies in *Ariel* turn Plath-as-confessor into a familiar presence while simultaneously reinforcing her status as a phantasmatic icon. Bayley notes: "*Ariel* is suffused with a personal story, but Plath is clever enough to set up a VIP enclosure that, as readers and listeners, we are never allowed to step beyond" (2009:549). Plath has in fact been called "literary culture's ultimate commodity" (Bryant 1999:17). Yet clearly a study of her work should not entail simplistic binaries (public/private, reality/illusion, male/female and academic/popular) geared toward the affirmation of a cultural myth at the expense of the complexities and contradictions which underpin the discursive construction of the 'IMAX' image or star text of 'Sylvia Plath'.

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In the publicity-driven twentieth century, Plath appears as a symptom for a culture of self-aggrandisement in which the viability of the performances of one's public image(s) is the sole criterion upon which one's sense of self rests (Bronfen 2001). In his poem "Fulbright Scholars" (*Birthday Letters* 1999), Ted Hughes underscores Plath's conscious sense of role playing and enlarged public persona when he imagines what she might have looked like in the photograph of the poem's title: he notices, for instance, her "long hair, loose waves", her "Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid", and her "exaggerated American grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers". Here, he has Plath resemble Veronica Lake, a film star who is able to act alluring in front of the cameras, yet masking a sadness and uncertainty beneath the formulaic exterior of sociability and confidence[5]. It has been said that the reward of 'the glare', the camera lingering on the body, for star and watcher alike, is the potential for failure or shame – in Rose's words, the "potential for [public] humiliation", for "awe", "dread", and the "excited gasp at the fall" (2003:4).

This public/private tension poses the question of an interchange between reality and illusion – each of these both 'real' and 'non-real' according to Butler's (1999) paradigm of performativity. Indeed, there is no greater place of illusion than Hollywood, which exemplifies a world of surfaces and money, and views people solely as commodities. While the origin of the Hollywood nickname, 'Tinseltown', remains obscure, one theory implies that it is derived from actor and musician Oscar Levant's pre-1965 cynically witty remark that if you "strip away the phoney tinsel of Hollywood", you find "the real tinsel underneath" (Anon 2007). The metonym of Hollywood cinema, the 'silver screen', is further evocative of this glittery façade which in effect reaches into the fundamental rather than being merely an existence of 'surface'.

The power of illusion is dealt with most explicitly through Plath's conflation of public performance and the seemingly private, anonymous roles of the stay-at-home wife and mother. In "Lesbos", for example, mundane private life is amplified into mythical proportions, as the domestic scene is described as "all Hollywood" artifice, the speaker an actress on the film set or suspended 'reality' of her "windowless", caged life. By drawing on popular forms of media such as cinema and television, the *Ariel* poems respond to the reality/illusion divide of their historical context. They "probe the nightmarish underside of the Cold War suburban dream of normality. Their satirical target, like that of many contemporary thrillers and horror films, is the stifling family-centred and ethnographic conformity of the 1950s small-town idyll" (Britzolakis 2002:143).

In "Lesbos", employing a Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, Plath deliberately exposes the contrived quality of the speaker's role through the systematic manner in which the scene is 'set up'. There are "Coy paper strips for doors", "Stage curtains", and a synthetic "fluorescent light wincing on and off" in all its jarring automatic intensity. Bryant comments on this performativity, remarking that Plath "draws the reader into the intimate spaces of the home ... only to reveal a stage" (1999:22). In effect, the barrier between the public and the private falls away in the writer's emphasis on the home as a performative space. Furthermore, in Helle's words, redolent of the 'photographic' and women's increasingly public role as consumers in 1950s America, Plath is "moving beyond the fantasy of the spatial privacy of 'home' to greater public exposure" (2005:647). Unmistakably, Plath's relegation to the female private sphere of wife, mother, homemaker, collides with her public interests as a creative woman in a male poetic tradition and with her aspiration to become a literary celebrity.

To return to the domestic intrigue of "Lesbos": the dominant image of the kitchen as a private, feminine locale of warmth and domestic bliss is intentionally subverted through the viciousness and repugnance of the domestic staging. Consider the snake-like "potatoes hiss", the "stink of fat and baby crap"; similarly, the baby who "smiles" is a "fat snail", and the "smog of cooking" is equivalent to "the smog of hell". Plath herself alluded to feeling choked in the domestic context (1992). Intent on shocking cultural mores, the female speaker in "Lesbos" refuses to maintain the pretence of her own rapidly dissolving façade or suburban sham, displaying instead an actuality that is embodied in her child, to whom she refers as lying "face down on the floor", "kicking to disappear– / Why she is schizophrenic, / Her face red and white, a panic". The woman's socially unusual perspective might imply psychological instability, and yet as Bryant's (2002) research explains, such hallucinations and voices were commonplace features of the strategies used in commercial advertising, and they signal the domestic surrealism of 1950s consumer culture. In these terms, the housewife's madness is not the idiosyncratic mark of personal failure or lunacy; it is the side-effect of a consumer culture aimed at making the domestic woman a more efficient, appealing product and, ironically, making the domestic space a realm of infinite fantastical possibilities or illusionist acts. *This* product, in its own voice, promises you sparkling floors. *That* product – also speaking as if to you, the ideal domestic goddess – assures you of its unprecedented power to transform your kitchen into a virtual germ-free hospital! In "Lesbos", this domestic surrealism produces what Britzolakis describes as a "quasi-Brechtian alienation effect" which "confront[s] the reader with a world locked into the frozen grimace

of [pop psychological] cliché" (2002:146). At odds with the 1950s *Donna Reed Show* smokescreen of the perfect American family, the speaker's outsider status in the domestic sphere grants her the ability to recognise the cruel sexual power-play of the domestic set-up: "You say your husband is just no good to you", "A dog picked up your doggy husband" (an echo of Ted Hughes' infidelity).

This familial imperfection extends to the speaker's figurative interaction with her substitute female self, conveyed through Plath's allusions to her subject's schizophrenic point of view: "You have one baby, I have two". The speaker's desire to escape her claustrophobic existence is a self-negating one, as it is thwarted by the paradoxical entrapment of her real, sentimental roles as housewife and mother. Even when the speaker notices her alternative self's sensuousness, for instance, her words manifest engulfment in domestic imagery: "I see your cute décor / Close on you like the fist of a baby". Despite the protagonist's momentary escape from domestic stricture and conformity in her interaction with the erotic 'other woman', their association bodes no Hollywood happy ending, as they are "venomous snake opposites" suggestive of an unstable and degraded femininity (Britzolakis 2002:217). This interpretation of "Lesbos" is therefore not quite what Margaret Dickie (1982) describes as Plath's censure of the lack of community between women.

Along performative lines, while the unstable speaker's metaphorical escape has no secure foothold in reality, her real life is clearly just as artificial. This notion is perpetuated by Plath's focus on donning the public mask for the thrill not only of audience applause, but also the sexual frisson: "You acted, acted, acted for the thrill". Plath uses the oxymoron of staged private relationships to expose the destructive reality behind the public disguise of social decorum and stalwart sexual conservatism which prevailed in 1950s America. The speaker in "Lesbos" is caught within the confines of married life and motherhood, yet her alternative – a role as a sexually liberated woman – offers no respite due to the socialised passivity and societal pressures endorsed by patriarchy, which pre-emptively blight the enactment of such an identity.

Plath's cynicism toward the stereotypical celebrity role of the glamour girl is another issue evident in "Lesbos" and, in many ways, speaks to her understanding of "fame and self-image in terms of a gendered spectacle" (Helle 2007:183). In a stream-of-consciousness poetic narration akin to the theatrical interior monologue, the speaker claims, "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair", an intertextual reference to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", alluding to the classical myth of the siren who sits on a rock dressing her tresses and luring sailors to their fate. Throughout "Lesbos", Plath's repetitive

use of the words "I should" mirrors the phrasing Eliot employs: "*I should* have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas", "*Should I ...* Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (my italics).

Both Plath and Eliot use the phrasing of the potential mood and the grammatical auxiliary verb 'should' to draw attention to the empty fantasies of their respective protagonists. As Prufrock recounts, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. // I do not think they will sing to me". This failure to extend the fantasised self into an indicative reality is replicated in "Lesbos" when the speaker, in connection with her inability to manifest her identity as a seductress, bemoans, "We should meet in another life, we should meet in air, / Me and you". As Britzolakis maintains, "The poem's landscape is the detritus of a female subjectivity that wants *to be exchanged*, to be a Hollywood starlet, a mermaid, or a *femme fatale*" (2002:127). In other words, Plath roots the poem in a 1950s advertising economy premised on the exchange of identities-as-goods, the replacement of an outmoded, unsatisfying identity – the stay-at-home female – with an enhanced, glamorous model.

The improved identities referred to by Britzolakis coalesce uneasily in "Lesbos" when the speaker declares, "I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair". This line parodies not only the Hollywood notion of the *woman*-as-sex-siren, but also the High Modernist Eliotian image of a *feminised* and sexualised Prufrock who proclaims, "I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. // Shall I part my hair behind?" ("The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock"). The speaker continues, in "Lesbos", to refer to place and sexuality: "In New York, in Hollywood, the men said: 'Through? Gee baby, you are rare'". This ironic colloquialism, indicative of the speaker's paradoxical distance from, and internalisation of, her outward image, is stimulated by a culture that encourages women to surrender their bodies sexually in order to feel desired by men. While Plath's rhetorical costume of satire is aimed at the deflation of male heterosexist gender norms, it is also an empowering mode that "yields fame and visibility", as it is associated with masculinity and literary longevity (Helal 2004:91). As such, this tension underlines Plath's befuddling role as a woman poet with regard to her undercutting of masculinity at the same time as she encodes her female experience in a star-studded male poetic style.

Consistent with the ambiguity of her life and work, Plath's literary satire of the glamour-girl or female celebrity role is contradicted by aspects of her actual IMAX persona – variously, her rhetorical moves to win fame (albeit *intellectual* fame), her fashion consciousness, and her flirtatious behaviour with the opposite sex. Take into account, for instance, the following extract from *Letters Home*: "Picture me then in my navy-blue bolero

suit and versatile brown coat, snuggled in the back seat of an open car" (1992:75). Here, Plath feeds our fantasy life by gravitating towards a stereotypical, sentimental image from a 1950s Hollywood film where "a nauseous excess of *consumable* experience threatens to overwhelm the boundaries of the self" (my italics) (Britzolakis 2002:23). The push-pull tension between glamour and ordinariness is further suggested through Plath's intimations that she was torn between the cinematic roles of the good girl and the *femme fatale*, conceived in Plathian terms as her 'academic' and 'popular' selves respectively. In three 1954 letters to her mother, Plath reveals how she tries out antonymous selves; one blonde, "daring" and "adventuresome", as her mother characterises them, and the other a staid brunette: "My brownhaired personality is most studious, charming, and earnest ... I know that underneath the blazing jaunts in yellow convertibles to exquisite restaurants I am ... puritanical basically" (1992:141,144).

In spite of this acknowledged façade, the alluring iridescence synonymous with the glamour-girl image provides an enduring metaphorical trope (Jones n. d.) for Plath's engagement with the illusory world of Tinseltown and female identity. Integral to the cultural reception and attraction of Hollywood and, by extension, literary celebrity, many of the speakers in *Ariel* use the words 'glitter' or 'glittering' as a means of negotiating the reality/illusion binary which plays a primary role in the circulation of Plath's IMAX image. In "Death and Co.", for example, the second figure is described as a "Bastard / Masturbating a glitter" and, in M. L. Rosenthal's (1970) terms, should be seen in relation to the speaker's projection of herself as dead. This quotation links the contradictory 'taboo' and attraction of masturbation and death with the glittery disguise of Tinseltown. Moreover, given Plath's identification of ejaculatory fluid with dew (see chapter two), the speaker's declaration that "The dew makes a star" consolidates the link between vulgar corporeal sexuality and stellar celebrity. One can liken this connection to the 'Plath myth', where, as a critic might risk observing, the writer's own glittering fame in the corpus of her work is perverted and vulgarised, albeit paradoxically triggered, by the writer's suicide and the empty signifier of her fetishised corpse. In many ways, this disingenuous image recalls Rose's (2003) 'glittering body' motif, which is similarly premised on the deceptive appeal of stardom, the celebrity's body an aesthetic surface "on which a society writes large its own [vulgar] preoccupations" (Mercer 1989:70).

Here, it is worth pausing to consider several associated points, as the mirage and distorting effects of 'glitter' recur in several *Ariel* poems, among them "The Munich Mannequins", where "black phones on hooks" are "Glittering and digesting / Voicelessness".

Contrary to Nelson's (2006) claim that mass celebrity effects personal voice, Plath suggests that with the deceptive quality of Hollywood and fame comes a muteness and an attrition of individuality. This is represented by the dummies' plasticised lack of uniqueness. "The Munich Mannequins" also responds to "the threat of extinction of the self" posed by post-war material culture (Helle 2005:643). This focus on the commodified 'star' self can be extended to the notion of literary celebrity, for as Joe Moran argues, the literary marketplace similarly subjects writers to its "anti-individualizing effects" (2000:61). In such terms, literature is produced not as an expression of 'self', but as a means of catering to a 'sardine factory' mode of creation designed to please the mass consumer at the expense of the writer-as-individual.

The deceptive quality of glitter is extended in "Berck-Plage", a poem in which Plath subverts the reader's expectations: "On the balconies of the hotel, things are glittering. / Things, things". In the context, this observation seems to point towards the reification of commodities, the Hollywood focus on the acquisition of wealth, and the exchange of the 'real' for the shimmering simulacra associated with stardom and extravagant consumption. However, the reader's expectations are subverted when the speaker announces that the "things" are "Tubular steel wheelchairs" and "aluminium crutches". This is an extremely unstable conceptual landscape, one in which a reader is interpretively challenged. This is especially so when it gradually emerges that these 'things' are objects of "Such salt-sweetness", 'prosthetics', as it were, for another, paradoxically better self. The disabling façade, a deceptive appearance which conceals a bitter truth, entrenches a perversion of reality in keeping with the Hollywood lifestyle and film industry and, in doing so, illuminates the sites of dissonance around Plath's engagement with celebrity and obscurity.

As a convivial, well dressed girl, Plath conformed to what was known as the "social Smith façade" (Ames 1970:168). Her complexity and extremity of emotion was, in most cases, hidden beneath her polished, 'glittering' exterior. According to Lois Ames, Lowell recalled that there was "no intimation of what would come later" in the explosive *Ariel* poems (1970:168). This facility of the skin to serve a deceptive, splitting function between mind and body, reality and illusion (indeed, not to *reflect* but rather refract), informs "A Birthday Present". The poem depicts Plath's struggle between the demands of her public guise as a housewife and her secret yearning for some kind of celebrity or supraordinary enormity achieved through self-actualisation and creative fulfilment. In a treatment akin to that of "Lesbos", Plath's housewife, the personification of a death-in-life domestic masquerade (Britzolakis 2002), knowingly lives a life of pretence. This is effectively

rendered in a poetic voice, redolent of an advertising jingle (Bryant 1999), which expresses the speaker's double consciousness embodied in the phantasmatic, uncanny birthday present:

> When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it
>   thinking
>
> "Is this the one I am to appear for,
> Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?
>
> Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
> Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.
>
> Is this the one for the annunciation?
> My god, what a laugh!"

The voice of the gift is sardonic, perceptive and wise, yet these qualities are laboriously hidden beneath a glittering skin of wrapping paper which "shimmers". (These qualities have analogies with the so-called male intellectualism Plath both aspired to and sought to unmask as a woman poet.)

Conflated with this teasing, provoking image, the housewife herself is presented as a gleaming, soon-to-be unveiled present for her husband within the contrived relations of exchange that characterise the institution of marriage: "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It has shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?" While Kathleen Margaret Lant suggests that what lies behind the veil is "not necessarily the female body since female subjectivity seems centered upon the speaker of the poem" (1993:650), in my interpretation the double-consciousness implied by the images of the fetishistically clothed present-as-woman and speaker-as-woman hints otherwise. Consider the image of the veil. In a reversal of the symbolic process of lifting the veil in the marriage ceremony, the female speaker's exhortations to "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil" signify her desire to return to an unmarried state, which suggests that marriage has played a primary role in exacerbating her presently split consciousness. As a separating device, the veils "shimmering like curtains" are the alienating equivalent of the speaker's double consciousness in the staged domestic interior and are conflated with the birthday present's glittering wrapping.

The gift itself symbolises the speaker's wish for the death of her unbearable split consciousness and a birthday for a whole identity. This death is aptly referred to by Lant, not as a moment of transcendent vision, but as one of "murderous enlightenment" (1993:650) in which a "knife" enters or rapes the female observer's body, causing pain, disfigurement, and

eventual decease. It is the alluring disguise of the present that attracts the housewife, which in turn heightens her interest in opening or unmasking the gift and thereby enjoying a release from a stultifying domestic existence. In other words, through a smokescreen or 'glitter' – essentially the female "veil of appearance" (Britzolakis 2002:117) – Plath's speaker is assisted in her journey toward the demise of her split subjectivity. The striving towards self-actualisation, conceptualised in terms of a 'celebrity' reality/illusion marriage of sorts, is therefore portrayed as an ambiguous, complicated process. Paradoxically, however, while the gift is allied with celebrity in that it might release the speaker into a fantasy world of fine things and glamour, she also seems to intuit the empty promise signalled by this release. The gift, any gift in fact, is but an ineffectual and impossible substitute for the dream of a self that the speaker has had to forfeit in the service of a domestic bliss which she has quickly revealed as phoney.

The mind/body drama of "A Birthday Present" presents psychological assault in largely private or enclosed suburban terms, yet as public discourses, celebrity and striptease cultures (McNair 2002) invariably stage forms of psycho*social* spectacle. Irving Howe, for instance, in his discussion of confessional poetry, refers to a paparazzi-infused culture preoccupied with "self-exposure, self-assault, self-revelation" (1972:89). Were it not for the contribution of the public, their craving to conjoin celebrity with catastrophe[6], it is unlikely that Plath would have been created as a cultic, vulgarised 'body' ripe for popular and periodical consumption as a "fascinating tabloid freak" (Bryant 2004:243). Quoting one of her students, Bryant maintains that the "'recycled narrative' of Plath's life proves 'as lurid and titillating as the headline of a supermarket tabloid: 'Golden Girl Goes Mad: Smithie on a Suicide Mission!'" (2004:243). Note also the title of Anne Stevenson's biography, *Bitter Fame*, which reads like that of a film star plagued by scandal. Rose calls the book a type of "*cause célèbre*" in the abusive biography genre (1991:93). Plath was profoundly aware of the public's appetite for scandal as a form of entertainment and voyeuristic gratification with the potential to "render her authorship illegitimate" (Helal 2004:95) through the creation of a disgraced public figure. As Saul Maloff states (he is referring to *The Bell Jar*): "We look for the slips and wait for the voice to crack. We want the bad, the worst news; that's what we're here for, to be made happy by horror, not to be amused by girlish chatter" (1988:105). In many ways, an astute Plath was consciously playing her audience in order to gratify her own ends, yet whatever the allure of celebrity, Plath also used her poetry to expose and parody the focus on public performance and the "trash culture of True Confessions" (Britzolakis 2002:154) on which a nascent media culture fed.

In the poem "Aftermath", for example, society's penchant for calamity and salacious detail revolves around the speaker's description of the scene after a fire has razed a home. The incident provides an opportunity for obscene spectatorship, as onlookers, "[c]ompelled by calamity's magnet", "loiter and stare as if the house / Burnt-out were theirs, or as if they thought / Some scandal might any minute ooze / From a smoke-choked closet into light". As Robin Peel (2007) suggests, the onlookers become the mass cultural mob who overcrowd and intrude on the speaker's privacy in order to see for themselves the "gossiping images" which, in Plath's poem "On the Decline of Oracles", "invade the cloistral eye like pages / From a gross comic strip". Synonymous with celebrity culture's feeding on curiosity, the audience members are bloodthirsty "hunters" whose thrill reaches an anti-climax, as there are "No deaths" or "prodigious injuries" off which to feed.

In the poem, Plath's female speaker, in comparison with the spectators, is a typical housewife "in a green smock" who "Moves humbly" through her "ruined apartments, taking stock / Of charred shoes, the sodden upholstery". This image, however, is juxtaposed with her other identity as "Mother Medea", whose unbridled rage is publicly directed at the destruction of her assets. This invites psychoanalytic interpretation, and I cannot here resist a brief deviation into Plath's psychobiography. According to Freudian symbolism, for example, the house might represent the protagonist's 'burnt' ego or, we might say, Plath as a modern Medea set fire to her assets (her children and marital house) in retaliation against Ted Hughes' sexual indiscretion (Stevenson 1989). In her discussion of celebrity, Rose touches upon this public/private erosion of boundaries: "Celebrity is often a ritual of public humiliation ... our guilty secret, a veiled way of putting into public circulation certain things which do not easily admit to public acknowledgement"; hence "the pull and the paradox", for celebrity is both "exciting and demeaning" (2003:203).

"Aftermath" ends with an insinuation that the house, its contents and, by extension, the female protagonist, have been cheated of a more sensational way to be destroyed publicly via "the pyre" or "the rack". The fact that the "crowd sucks" the Mother Medea figure's "last tear and turns away" illustrates that her personal tragedy is exploited and reduced to a melodramatic mockery at the hands of a crowd thirsty for nurturing spectacle and scandal. In spite of this social manipulation, Plath uses the poem to allude to the tendency for cultural icons to represent themselves as "wounded individuals, whose narcissistic injuries can be healed by the public gaze, media attention" (Bronfen 2001:118). This mending is superficial at best, for what "Aftermath" illustrates on the level of scandal and psychology is how public celebrity, for the writer, might "be an elaborate diversion from the complex, often punitive

audience, inside the mind" (Rose 2003:205), the brutal, devastating inner critic which leads writers to doubt and despair. In such a psychological context, approval is double-sided. The promise of a publicly inflated 'I' or the payoff of public attention (itself a kind of approval) Plath would receive as a glamour girl *cum* literary celebrity could be regarded as her attractive distraction from her particularly private or mental self-deprecations.

This bridge between public and private narcissism is revealed through Plath's attempted performance of an unattainable ideal of 'perfection', which for her constituted the zenith of her life. Her dangerous aptitude for excellence in all endeavours, particularly those intellectual, is evident in her treatment of a semi-autobiographical character in the poem "America! America!": "The girls' guidance counsellor" said "I was just too dangerously brainy. My high, pure string of straight A's might without proper extracurricular tempering, snap me into the void". The effects of perfection implied here bespeak a chasm of selfhood or a substanceless quality of being. This illusory brilliance is especially pertinent in the context of confessional poetry, where the individual artist endeavours to become his or her own genius or muse – the artistic embodiment of an unreal literary perfection, a god-like celebrity. Plath in fact called herself "The girl who wanted to be God" (1992:40), implying that fame as a woman poet would invest her with an irrefutable, surreal and 'masculine' public sway. One of Bryant's students refers to Plath's yearning to "'exalt her mortal existence' through publication" (2004:253).

Certainly, Plath's account of the acceptance of her 1958 submission to the *New Yorker* employs language deft in its emotional IMAX registers, indicating that she regarded writing as a grand career. She gushes: "The black thick print of Howard Moss's letter banged into my brain ... This shot of joy conquers an old dragon & should see me through the next months of writing on the crest of a creative wave" (2000b:397). Plath's yearning for the superlative status of the literary high-flyer and, by implication, her disdain for the 'imperfect' majority, is further reflected in a 1956 letter to her mother in which she praises Aurelia for the many sacrifices which she endured so that her children, Sylvia and Warren, might attend the finest colleges in America (Hayman 1991). Plath was initially enthralled at being accepted into the exclusive society of a prestigious college: "I can't believe I'm a SMITH GIRL!" she cried (1992:46), and at Cambridge, some years later, she marvelled at her proximity to members of the first rank intelligentsia which included John Lehmann, C. P. Snow, and David Daiches (Kamel 1988).

Plath also, however, derides the narcissistic 'hollowness' associated not only with literary celebrity as intellectual and aesthetic perfection, but also with the femaleness of the

corporeal star image. Take, for example, the poem "Edge", the focal point of which lies in Plath's awareness that perfection is a dangerous illusion evocative of the "inexorable logic of fame" (Rose 2003:205). While on the surface, Holbrook's interpretation of the poem as an "idolization of suicide and infanticide" (1976:2) may appear accurate, one should not overlook the likelihood that the irony and detachment of the speaker's voice show Plath's derision of the concept of a mythical perfection related to body language. This impossible purity of somatic form, which lends itself to poetic form, represents the antithesis of Rose's (1991) conceptualisation of the 'Plath archive' as an impure body-in-pieces. At any rate, a reader of *Ariel* is repeatedly situated within the tensions and ambivalences of Plath's attitude to the 'corporeal' as a motif in celebrity culture.

In "Edge", Plath depicts the "fatal enmeshment of surface, appearance, violence and media-hype" (Bronfen 2001:124) in a prescient projection that bears on what would become her own enshrined public image. In this poem, the female protagonist's self-immolating aesthetic perfection involves the reclamation of her body parts, inclusive of her children. "She has folded // Them back into her body" as a desperate means of reclaiming a perfect, pre-parturition femaleness and presenting herself as a beatific, iconic image: "The illusion of a Greek necessity". This corporeal flawlessness, inclusive of intellectual glamour ("scrolls"), extends to the poem's seemingly pure form of pared-down stanzas, run-on lines, and the lapidary rhythms of the moon-mother's impersonal, petrifying gaze (Britzolakis 2002). These misleading effects show how Plath, once again, draws on the idea of the 'glittering body', as she illustrates how, in situations akin to her actual life, the aura of the protagonist's role as a Greek goddess is used to blind the reader to those aspects of her identity which are "embarrassing, imperfect" and also "more deeply, historically, shameful" (Rose 2003:14). In the light of this comment, the protagonist is a figure who represents aspects of a troubled post-war national psyche with its challenges to the family unit and the boosterism of the American Dream. The failures she has painstakingly concealed show how, evocative of Plath's self-reflexive iconic status, she is a "mediatised cipher for the vulnerabilities and failures others sought to project onto her" (Bronfen 2001:125).

In other words, "Edge" is a poem in which the protagonist performs the murky interface between the "immediacy of fame" and our "expectation that celebrities function as a form of psychic healing for a pervasive sense of loss, disarray and failure on both a personal and a collective level" (Bronfen 2001:119). The connection between celebrity and tragedy underscores the abyss and the lies to which the protagonist's self-construction and "our fascination with such image-personalities" respond (Bronfen 2001:122). This identity-based

confusion between public appearance and private reality exposes, in Rose's words, "the ugly underside" of celebrity (2003:14), yet contradictions inevitably remain, as identity is constitutive of a female subjectivity that always chafes, in process, against facile binaries, such as vamp and virgin, which dominate cultural discourses around the female body.

Plath's constant striving towards corporeal perfection was a prerequisite for any woman in the 1950s who desired to be successful in an increasingly plasticised world of nascent celebrity culture defined by a mass mediated rhetoric of womanly beauty premised on whiteness, slenderness, and youth. According to Britzolakis (she is using David Riesman's ideas), identity in the 1950s "had become dependent upon the approval and admiration of an audience ... a condition exacerbated by advertising and popularized psychoanalysis" (2002:15). In the *Journals*, Plath reveals her dismay at what she perceives to be her intermittent failure to live up to the standard of women's beauty endorsed by an implicitly male audience, however superficial she intuits these standards to be:

> Tonight I am ugly. I have lost all faith in my ability to attract males. And in the female animal that is a rather pathetic malady ... What is it that makes one attractive? Last year I had several boys who wanted me for various reasons. I was sure of my looks ... and my ego was satiated. Now, after my three blind dates – two of which flopped ... completely, the third has also deflated. I wonder how I ever thought I was desirable. But inside, I know. I used to have sparkle, self-assurance. (2000a:23-4)

This excerpt from the *Journals*, a confessional form of writing associated with the mundane domestic or private sphere, female narcissism and so-called low culture, clashes with Plath's interests as a woman poet in a male-dominated profession governed by the cultural paradigm that masculinity equals superior poetic talent and sanctioned High Art (Helal 2004). The publication of Plath's *Journals* denotes an interpretive impasse "where a magnified author meets a minor form" (Bryant 2004:251), and evinces the frailty of academic/popular, public/private and male/female delineations – a recurring issue in feminist assessments of women's writing.

Given these uncertainties, while the *Journals* show Plath's alternation between critiquing and pampering her ego (she oscillates between feeling fat and ugly and admiring the beauty of her face and body), the *Ariel* poems and selected others frequently demonstrate how Plath as a woman writer taps into the male poetic tradition of satire in adopting a sardonic approach towards physical beauty as the glittery maintenance of one's public persona or female 'star' image. In "Death & Co.", for example, Plath's speaker, in reference

to the first character, reveals: "He tells me how badly I photograph". Here, visual air brushing is not a possibility, and the speaker is thus forced to live not only with a physically flawed 'I', but also with its permanent representation in photographic form. Likewise, in "Lesbos", the focus on physical beauty which typifies celebrity life in Hollywood is parodied by the speaker, who addresses her housewife persona with the following words: "The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you T.B. / Once you were beautiful". This dissolution of the façade of an idealised physical perfection further unsettles the notion of the unblemished body – although connected to self-destructiveness – as a core motif in celebrity culture.

"Mirror" provides an additional exemplar of Plath's self-conscious preoccupation with beauty or the exterior perfection of the self. As the cornerstone of self-representation, the looking-glass involves an eye/I and subject/object interplay. Plath refers to the mirror as a "twin" and "Muse" (2000a:194) and, in this regard, evokes connotations of the actor/audience dialectic integral to celebrity culture and its emphasis on the visual. In "Mirror", the female protagonist's appearance is rapidly transforming from that of a "young girl" to a scaly "old woman" – a visible ageing process by which she is evidently distressed. This emotion, triggered by the schizoid, annihilating properties of the highly reflective surface, is revealed when the speaker observes that "She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands". Extreme distress, in other words, brings to mind the perverse power over self-esteem of commercial consumer culture in which, according to Bronfen, "one's core value resides in what others think of one, so that the falling apart of this performative self-image is tantamount to a complete loss of self" (2001:123). In Plath's poem "Mirror", the variability of the female protagonist's face underscores the anguish involved not only in the certainty of an identity change, but also in the attempt to define one's self based on the exterior, or one's public image, and a public audience. The degeneration of the woman's youthful looks and her culturally induced self-obsessed preoccupation with beauty, while relevant to women in all facets of life, is certainly illumined by the Hollywood lifestyle of many celebrities.

Mirror imagery is reprised in "Face Lift" where, in Helal's words, "a visual display of femininity is redefined with masculine satirical expression" (2004:91). In the poem, Plath parodies the 1950s beauty parlour's superficial enhancement of physical beauty, and indeed astutely prefigures the 'nip and tuck' fascinations which mark contemporary reality television. The speaker's cosmetic surgical procedure (usually performed or controlled by a man) is characteristic of Hollywood values, and offers the "magical spectacle of transformation" or the fairytale narrative of "growing up and transformation in which discourses of beauty, dress and class are brought together" and, through this stylish

makeover, a sense of 'real' or realised self is achieved (Moseley 2002:39). Akin to "In Plaster" and "Tulips", "Face Lift" explores the "poetic phenomenology of [women's] patienthood" (Britzolakis 2002:92) and addresses what Cuenca refers to as popular culture's perverse encouragement of woman "to (re)construct her bodily image" for the benefit of heterosexual man's consumption (2009:183). I develop this focus on physical allure related to 'the gaze' in chapter two, but for the moment let me simply observe that in "Face Lift", Plath depicts how the speaker becomes an artificial, 'self-made beauty' in line with the dominant visual regimes of women's magazines such as *Harper's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Women's Home Companion*. When she grins, this reworked creature, "the stitches tauten". The wrinkled, "dewlapped" image with its unwanted layer of projected identity previously captured in her mirrored reflection has been cast-off, excised, exchanged for, a newer, more up-to-date model. This is ostensibly a better or more authentic self – and yet Plath's doubts are carried in the insistently split voice of the third person. The woman is attractively "Pink and smooth as a baby" and simultaneously vulnerable, exposed in her female narcissism and in a single, surreal poetic gesture, stripped, in effect, of all traces of her lived experience.

Given statements such as "the years draining into my pillow" and "I grow backward. I'm twenty", the lifting of the face to reverse time or create a more youthful appearance creates, in turn, a distorted version of the original. Most importantly, this reversal of the ageing process is presented as an illusion. In other words, the face lift itself is merely an ineffectual mask over a nonetheless aged reality. This lack of true facial transmutability implies that transformation in terms of identity is not a facile, clear-cut process. In this regard, the narrating 'I' does not quite, as Steven Gould Axelrod maintains, simply observe "a succession of selves in her mirror" (1985:288); nor does she transcend the limits of her body, as Adrienne Rich (1980) seems to imply in her 'out-of-body ruse' theory. Instead, the speaker's metamorphosis of identity sustains a difficult, painful dimension redolent of the face lift itself: skin does not "peel ... away easy as paper", but is exposed to knives and blood. Plath therefore engages in what Kate A. Baldwin describes as "a reconfiguration between narrative and performative displays of female selfhood" (2002:87). By this, she means that Plath unmasks; she strategically identifies with the subjective experience of the plastic surgery patient in order to reveal the false premises of a heterosexist metanarrative which centres on the desirable effects of the medical procedure as an incentive for women to mutilate their bodies in the pursuit of ageless beauty.

The aesthetic reconstruction or sculpting of the female body as a popular cultural discourse is tied to the voracious consumption of the 'ideal' physical proportions propagated

by 1950s Hollywood culture. In particular, the conflation of femaleness and thinness is one which Plath explores in her writing, sometimes with little to shore the ruins of her self against the revulsion she feels for the personae she creates. In the short story "Tongues of Stone", for example, she reflects on her own weight gain as occasioned by insulin therapy: a young girl is trapped "in the nightmare of the body, without a mind, without anything, only the soulless flesh which got fatter with the insulin and yellower with the fading tan". Corporeal perfection is also one of the central themes of "The Thin People", a poem in which Plath prefigures issues of female health and appearance which would come to occupy feminist theorists of contemporary consumer culture. The subject matter of "The Thin People" has seen its escalation in the emergence of a number of 'Pro-Anorexia' websites and images of skeletal models and actresses. According to many critics, however, among them Janice Markey (1993), the poem concerns the nature of war, in particular the silence of complicity that surrounded the Holocaust. It is not that I disagree; this element does exist in the poem on one level, yet in terms of my interest in Plath and female subjectivity, I believe that there is an added dimension which has been overlooked.

As in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", Plath somewhat provocatively uses the large-scale subjects of the abuses of war and skeletal, famished Holocaust victims as satirical metaphors for her critique of a manipulative, abasing society whose models of femininity and physical beauty are alienating and destructive, starved of nurture to the extent that a woman is best 'disappeared' to death. The phrases "Not guns, not abuses, // But a thin silence" hint at the extent of the muted fury of the anorexia sufferer when viewed through the lens of the Holocaust injustice, and point to the callous mystery and supremacy of supposedly voluntary starvation which is in effect orchestrated by devious social expectation. This manipulative cultural agenda is offset by the female anorexic's obsessive attempts to control or exhibit a public, quasi-masculine mastery over her body by controlling her intake of food and thereby moulding or ameliorating her physical form (Craik 1994). As implied here, the female body as a site of struggle or an enemy in the context of personal and cultural warfare signals a semi-glorification of eating disorders which could well apply to the veneration of female celebrities in Hollywood who find "their talent to persevere / In thinness". Evidently, Plath derides the idea that the acute willpower which female celebrities summon in their need to be thin constitutes a "talent" akin to, for instance, intellectual ability. In some ways, "The Thin People" highlights Plath's struggle with her own teenage adolescence bound up in love and shame or a self-inflicted punishment based on one's perceived lack of blondeness, beauty, glamour and thinness (Greenberg and Klaver 2009:186). In her discussion of teenage

girlhood, for example, Becca Klaver affirms: "Adolescent girls are our culture's premier self-torturers, and the culture encourages this through advertising and marketing campaigns" (2009:186).

The enforced cult of physical perfection in "The Thin People" occasions what Plath envisages as a fundamentally 'deadened', two-dimensional identity and lack of intellectual complexity: the thin people "are always with us", "Meagre of dimension as the grey people // On a movie-screen. They / Are unreal, we say: // It was only in a movie, it was only / In a war making evil headlines" that "they famished and / Grew so lean". Here, Plath equates the façade of the film world and its "thin", dreamlike, ego-inflated stars with the surreal nature of war and starvation. Identified as the collective "they", the "thin people" are de-individualised, 'fictional' beings whose identities are coercively constructed in order to wear a publicly-approved mask at the expense of their psychological attributes. Plath suggests that this thinness of identity cannot be upheld: "Under their thin-lipped smiles, // Their withering kingship. / How they prop each other up!" The "thin people" are so fake and insubstantial that without the entire paraphernalia of stage and filmic properties or 'props', their collective edifice would collapse. While the protagonists signal an attrition of the corporeal and the individual, they are simultaneously objects of the somatically beautiful, inflated or excessive 'I' and, in this manner, allude to Plath's negotiation of the troubling dichotomy of the 'disappearing' female body and the hyperbolic 'IMAX effect' concomitant with celebrity, identity, and presence.

One must acknowledge, however, that the declaratory audacity of the larger-than-life 'I' in this poem is, understandably, a point of contention for many readers who take issue with Plath's so-called irresponsible or expedient use of the Holocaust analogy. D. L. Eder (using ideas drawn from Lane 1979) discusses the strategy the "vanity mirror" (1980:303). In response to these indictments of metaphorical overreaching or actual conceit, Britzolakis contends that what critics are responding to is the staginess or "blatant theatricality" of the poem (2002:188). Further, Bryant (2002) contextualises Plath's strategy within 1950s advertisements which comprise blatant modes of inflated rhetoric and outrageous or scandalous claims. What Plath was attempting in "The Thin People", then, was in effect a form of rhetoric already naturalised and complacently unquestioned in advertising. Within the space of the poem, however, the discourse creates a heightened sociopoetic 'truth' which cannot be construed purely as irresponsible exaggeration. Through the "violent logic of 'othering'", the Holocaust or Nazi-Jew metaphor central to a number of Plath poems (see chapters two and three) is a self-reflexive and extreme "manifestation of the trope of

subjection to otherness", as it connotes a "radically simplified and unstable dialectic of self and other at work" (Britzolakis 2002:190,188). In this regard, while female illnesses such as anorexia may not have the visibility and historical impact of genocide, they nevertheless attest to the debilitating effects, for millions of women, of the paradoxical social construction of female identity as lack and simultaneously as excess.

Plath's contentious use of the self-as-other metaphor also provides the thematic core of "In Plaster". Like "The Thin People", the poem plays on popular notions of female physical beauty, yet is conceptualised in predominantly racial terms which show how Plath struggles to lay bare assumptions of race as connected with femininity. Race, we need to recall, was an issue prevalent in 1950s Hollywood and in America at large: racial tension was on the rise; there was a focus on black civil rights, and films such as Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958) gave public attention to the plight of marginalised ethnicities. In the poem "In Plaster", the speaker's bifurcated personality or double-bodied state points to a shifting perspective indicative of the instability of the identities of subject and object, self and other, alike. The "white person" represents the western, idealised concept of beauty, and the 'imperfect' "yellow" person is synonymous with the ugliness habitually associated with darker skin. Critics have suggested that Plath fetishises 'the other' as ethnographic spectacle (Britzolakis 2002), which alludes not only to the demeaning position of the person of colour 'on display', but also paradoxically to his or her power as a staged individual. Patricia Hill-Collins explicates the beauty myth as one premised on a hierarchy attached to different grades of skin colour: "Judging white women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies, but their white skin and straight hair privileges them in a system in which part of the basic definition of whiteness is superior" to black or brown or yellow (1990:791).

This pecking order, propagated since at least the 1950s by popular culture via an array of products such as skin lightening creams and white Barbie dolls, is undermined by Plath. She shows how a defiled femininity embodied in the outcast oriental "old yellow" (suggestive of the spectre of the Vietnam War's 'yellow' enemy) claims a space for itself and is an identity not shamed by putatively 'dirty' skin. "[O]ld yellow" is also, however, incongruously fixated on appearance. This irony is implied through the "'ugly and hairy" "old yellow['s]" references to her counterpart's "whiteness and beauty": "And the white person is certainly the superior one", "her amazingly white torso". As such, the woman poet absurdly vilifies and debases a self that, in Lant's words, "represents her most cherished beliefs and goals" (1993:640) – physical and creative dissidence. In a sense, then, Plath buys

into the stereotype, as she in part regards the concealed "yellow" self as unwholesome and disruptive.

Echoing "The Thin People", the "white person" overlaps with Plath's public persona and conforms to the film-star emphasis on thinness: "She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints". Simultaneously, she evinces lack of complexity as an individual: "she had no personality", and, as a Galatean woman, her body is a "lump of matter" to be sculpted by the male gaze *and* the male artist (Cuenca 2009:187). In this regard, Plath calls for a redefinition of female beauty, shifting criteria from external, visible markers to the elusive complexity of women's "inscrutable intelligence" (Stafford 2005:185). This stance, for a woman poet of her generation, was provocative. In the 1950s, certainly, it was most unfashionable for a woman to be an intellectual. Prejudice against brainy girls was rife in American high schools and colleges, as well as in business, and Plath attempted, with great difficulty, to mask this aspect of her identity with a "white", erasing façade of beauty, naïveté and light-hearted wit (Markey 1993). Unlike Plath's intellectualism embodied in the masked "old yellow", the "white person" represents the figure of the curvaceous dumb blonde found in many Hollywood films and seems to prove Rose's profession that "to seek or confer fame is either the appropriate manifestation of public valour and dignity, or a self-violation and affront to our true inner worth" (2003:203). (Which is which? Well may you ask!)

In particular, Plath's cultivation of her "white", bleached blonde persona brings to mind the primary motivation of another female public figure of the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe. The following revelations that "old yellow" makes seem to refer to a despised image of 'saintly' femininity (Britzolakis 2002) personified by Monroe in relation to her public persona and abusive relationships: "I patronized her" and "she lapped it up", "You could tell" she had "a slave mentality", "I couldn't understand her stupid behavior! / When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist. / Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her". The last line alludes to Monroe's publicly self-defining song "I Wanna Be Loved By You" (1959) – contiguous to Plath's writing of "In Plaster" in 1961 and the unspoken dictum of many fame-hungry actresses and poets. As an ambiguous persona, the 'old yellow' figure seems to symbolise an amalgam of cultural figures and practices. One such individual is the male Hollywood agent who exposes the seedy reality behind the façade of celebrity by monopolising the sexual and financial perquisites of the Monroe-like "white person": "She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages // Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful".

It seems that Plath felt a type of kinship with Monroe, as the parallels between their lives, and deaths, are uncanny. Both chased love (leaning toward paternalism) and recognition with tremendous intensity and made no secret of their desire to become someone else. In Monroe's case, she became a blonde outline, an icon whose fame was built on the accrual of layers of imagery, while Plath's journey was symbolised by an attempt to shed those layers, "to get from the 'golden girl' down to the 'deep self', and back again" (Wagner 1988:306). In addition, their inopportune deaths were proximate time-wise – Monroe in August 1962 and Plath in February 1963. The following recollection indicates that Monroe was a public figure who left an indelible mark on Plath's subconscious:

> Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother. An occasion of 'chatting' with audience much as the occasion with Eliot will turn out, I suppose. I spoke, almost in tears, of how much she and Arthur Miller meant to us ... She gave me an expert manicure. I had not washed my hair, and asked her all about hairdressers, saying no matter where I went, they always imposed a horrid cut on me. She invited me to visit her ... promising a new, flowering life. (2000a:513-14)

The Monroe/Miller marriage (along with the Monroe/Eliot partnering of Plath's dream) aptly represents the tension that characterises Plath's yearning, as a poet, to "speak as a subject against the dehumanizing commodity culture" of celebrity while also improving and preserving her "'feminine' allure as a valuable object within this same culture" (Leonard 1992:63) *and* capitalising on an intellectual, writerly aspiration to a place in the literary canon. Monroe's fall from grace signals a collapse of her public façade and, in this light, speaks most directly to Plath's personal need to shed her own cheery public interface of "whiteness and beauty" and reveal her latent qualities in her quest for fame or 'IMAX' authorship: "And it was I who attracted everybody's attention".

At this juncture, it is pertinent to consider the yellow/white person relationship in view of Plath's poetic style. The "old yellow" self, a burgeoning poetic vision or regenerative consciousness, seems to be arguing with the perfect and inflexible "white" self about the limitations of a traditional style and inherited form, ever associated with male poetic models (see chapter three). "In Plaster" does, however, close on the note that the mutually broken public and private selves, traditional and emergent poetic forms, cannot exist without each other: "I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her, / And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me". As Langdon Hammer suggests, "neither self nor representation can exist without the other" (2001:79). Yet, as Plath shows via the images of

the "yellow" arm and "white" plaster cast or cover, a superficial, external welding of broken or fissured elements of the self belies the fact that reconstruction or the repair of the woman poet's identity is a difficult, individualistic, internal process.

Plath's fraught relationship with the concept of stardom is further explored in "Stings", where the glamour of celebrity is seen as "a way of blinding us" to what is "in the humdrum of the day-to-day" (Rose 2003:14). The reader sees Plath deflecting elements of her identity that might threaten her professionally (Helal 2004), as the speaker in the poem holds on to the belief that her real life constitutes something more special than the ordinary one she is currently leading as a housewife or one of the "winged, unmiraculous" crowd: "I am no drudge", "I / Have a self to recover, a queen". Here, Plath recognises the threat that the majority poses to the potential excellence and individuality of the poet as distinctive, even superior intelligence.

In "Stings", Plath uses the collapse of the speaker's socially assumed female persona as home-maker to show how the 'celebrity' or poem-maker self ("honey-machine"), albeit an alienated one, assists the woman poet in her tumultuous journey toward the attainment of a complex, if not an integrated, identity. This singular 'queen bee' distinction, although androgynously aligned with male literary potency and the prototypical rising female spirit of the *Ariel* poems, is a "red / Scar in the sky" – what Britzolakis (2002) calls a vulnerable, stigmatic 'I' rather than the marker of a triumphant affirmation of selfhood. Ironically, as Bronfen (she is quoting Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath her Feet* [1999]) affirms of this literary celebrity self: "'to bare her scars, to live her private life in public, to talk about her wounds, her mistakes, her faults'", she is "belatedly found to be not just a cult figure but also to be 'one of us'" (2001:133).

Again and again, then, Plath's poems in *Ariel* and elsewhere show the writer tussling with the contradictory roles permitted to women in the 1950s. While Plath-as-poet is clearly committed to challenging cultural mores and prevailing definitions of femininity, whether of the star system or domesticity, she also plays into the female constructions or images dictated by these ideologies, as they constitute an acceptable or sanctioned route into the desirable manly world of letters. Plath's ambivalent critique of celebrity as a popular cultural discourse indicates that the public/private binary subscribes to complication which, when considered in conjunction with the notion of a liminal identity, "interrupts the [confessional] promise of an intimate narrative" (Helal 2004:83), thereby mocking the alien concept of privacy in a world of ceaseless exposure. As a structured polysemy or an "exaggerated avatar of the jumbled selves of her audience" (Bronfen 2001:136), Plath explicitly performs her own fictional

status, for as Bronfen makes clear, in "the fact that she has not only completely fashioned herself but that all the intimacy she seems to expose is nothing other than a part of this construction, there is something fully authentic. She will expend herself in her role as public performer at all costs" (2001:136).

The entangled discourses which underpin Plath's interrogation of celebrity culture speak to the dissonant connotations of celebrity both upheld and unsettled by Plath. It is precisely the combination of specialness and ordinariness secured around her star image which enables the reader to feel along with Plath and to feed his or her own desires and emotions. Further, consider the paradox of Plath's life: she cannot escape the complexities and unsolvable tension between her desire for a female 'celebrity' life above the ordinary – that is, above the bland anonymity of the domestic roles of wife and mother – and her equally strong aspiration for 'male' literary achievement or intellectual glamour through the attainment of authorial power which provides a forum for the contestation of the former, inadequate identity. Through her juxtaposition of feminine sexuality and the act of writing, Plath self-consciously parodies what is expected of her as a woman writer (Helal 2004), even as she desires to meet and fulfil all of these expectations, their very disparate, conflicting claims threatening to cancel her out.

Nevertheless, as Rose maintains of so-called confessional women poets like Sylvia Plath, "something of the complex mix of exposure and failing associated with celebrity appears to have been part of the writing contract which they drew up with themselves" (2003:5). Indeed, as modern celebrity imaging both demands and condemns (Bronfen 2001), the emotive bathos and melodrama of Plath's media-hyped *denouement* seem to be the only satisfying conclusion to a life which was, in the end, less ordinary. As Arielle Greenberg and Klaver observe of the mythic romance or glamour of unhappiness, "[s]uicide attempts", never mind suicide itself, "are the end of a spectrum of self-destructive ways to make people notice your pain" (2009:192). In this regard, Plath was a true 'Hollywood celebrity', a consumable 'Popcorn Venus' in the eyes of a lethally voyeuristic culture. Rose states tellingly: "Rather than having celebrities about whom we feel curious, we create celebrities so that our curiosity, or rather curiosity at its most ruthless, can be licensed and maintained" (2003:214). Sylvia Plath did not survive the suicide, but 'Sylvia Plath' has: she has become a posthumously manufactured figure, a spectacular performance act.

CHAPTER TWO: ASSUMING THE POSITION

In David Levine's drawing for the "New York Review of Books" calendar (1999), 'Sylvia Plath' poses as Miss June – an image synonymous with the voyeuristic consumption of Plath as a pin-up poet in a male literary tradition. This subordination of literary prowess to alluring physical form gestures towards the persistent physicality/textuality slippage which inevitably confronts the researcher working on Plath's poetry. In particular, the exhibitionism that characterises the *Ariel* poems and their author is rooted in an interplay of cultural discourses around the 'corporeal'[7], which is intended to refer not only to psychological and physiological identity but also to the 'body' of the Plath archive itself. One such discourse is that of 'the gaze', which, as a manifestation of the act of voyeurism inflected through slippages of the eye/I as cinematic lens, involves the self-in-performance on a number of levels. As numerous theorists have now argued, among them Butler, the body does not merely represent social norms, it is, in Janet McCabe's words, "produced by discourses that give it meaning" (2004:109). Plath's fascination with the female body as an object of the gaze is evident in her drawings of glamorous film stars in her most bare or un-masked text, the *Unabridged Journals*, where the privacy of a form not intended for publication is revealed – even violated – by public exposure (Connors 2007). In this context, Plath's ambiguous position as both bearer of the gaze *and* bared by the gaze issues central to the question of female spectatorship.

What I propose, in relation to *Ariel*, is a deconstruction of the female gaze while simultaneously acknowledging the difficulties tied to Plath's experience as a woman poet in a male-oriented culture premised on the dichotomy of male spectator and female spectacle. While I will draw on influential scholarship of the female gaze (Mulvey 1989, Kaplan 1984, Bellour 1979, Doane 1982 and Modleski 1988), I intend to demonstrate how, through manipulations of point of view (Dickie 1982) and shifting identifications between viewing positions and erotic images, Plath variously upholds and unsettles hierarchical binaries such as active/passive and heterosexual/homosexual. This is not an easy thought to accommodate, as it is premised on an understanding of femaleness as not simply accessible to analysis or explicable according to received conventions, but elusive and mysterious, plural and unresolved, a contingency which may be extended to the very poems. Such performativity from within, I maintain, is a significant constituent of Plath's poetic personae in *Ariel*. In Butlerian terms, "it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of [gender] identity becomes possible" (1999:185).

Moreover, given that writing is described as the "most intimate" of possessions (Rose 2003:5), I hope to demonstrate how the written word awkwardly synthesises the 'corporeal' and the 'confessional'. Lant, notably, states that "Plath's rhetorical stance of 'figurative nakedness' fuses with the literal exposure of skin" (1993:621), and I will explore Plath's position as a woman poet who was implicated in the early stages of the development of a mass culture of consumption founded on "the buying and selling of [sexualised] images" (Britzolakis 2002:36). This is a point raised by Bayley who, in her discussion of Cold War paranoia and voyeurism in Plath's work, illustrates how *Ariel* is saturated in tropes of the specular and spectacular within popular culture, and Plath's "Smith College art scrapbooks are a testament to her absorption in a [commodified] culture of viewing" (2009:550). I will consider the extent to which Plath's personae are complicit in the discursive gaze that invites the eyes/I's of women to consume images as female spectators and/or be consumed as female spectacles. Difficulties of this nature have troubled many Plath critics, and their conflicting responses attest to the challenges, for me, of trying to locate myself in relation to Plath's unusual female identity.

In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989, originally an article of 1975), and subsequently in the paper "Afterthoughts" (1989, first published in 1981), Mulvey approvingly engages with John Berger's statement in *Ways of Seeing*: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed female" (1972:47). Mulvey, writing in the context of cinematic spectatorship, advances the presupposition that in order to savour a fantasy of subjectivity, the female spectator must cross-identify as a man or assume a masculine position restless in its "borrowed transvestite clothes" (1989:33). While there is some mobility indicated in this gendered appropriation, the argument remains rooted in a sexual imbalance between active/male and passive/female, with the result that gender hierarchy is very much maintained.

Numerous scholars have found Mulvey's arguments valid, among them Kaplan, who, in a 1984 article, argues that "the woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desire, or, at one remove, positions herself as [a man actively] watching a woman who is a passive recipient of male desires and sexual actions" (Lewallen 1988:100). In the *Unabridged Journals*, for instance, Plath makes the following erotically-charged observations: "I notice women's breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress" (2000b:22), and we may infer that Plath, as a woman, experienced a hyperbolic acuity of her own double

consciousness in the process of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1989:19). This disembodiment or phallocentric sensation of looking at one's own performative image(s) and other women through 'male' eyes nonetheless signals a reductionist understanding of the female gaze.

For as Kenneth Mackinnon (1999) and David Rodowick (1982) propose, Mulvey and Kaplan fail to take cognizance of the credibility of a recognisably female spectator. In other words, Mulvey and Kaplan occlude the possibility that the female subject has the potential and power to engage in an active looking that is not entirely policed by a discourse of gendered appropriation. Also, in his discussion of cinematic narrative and gaze theory, Clifford T. Manlove questions Mulvey's application of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory in relation to her own gaze theory. Lacan, in particular, argues that "the gaze is a much more primary part of human subjectivity than patriarchy, which, although powerful, is a secondary manifestation of culture" (2007:84). Furthermore, Mulvey's and Kaplan's theories subscribe to a heterosexual relationship between voyeuristic subject and object, a correlation which is undermined by Butler (1999), who argues that there is no 'original' or 'natural' heterosexual masculinity and femininity, as we construct an ideal of it through our gender performances. Butler explains that "[i]f the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express" (1988:7). Given the ambiguity at the heart of gaze theory, it is feasible to suggest that Plath and her personae perform a number of conflicting roles. At the very least, as female spectators and performers, they likely to be positioned within three options posited by Mulvey, Bellour, and Doane: masculinisation, masochism and/or marginality. While Plath-as-woman and the *Ariel* personae remain locked within (and often celebrate) these alternatives, Plath-as-poet, her personae, and the reader/viewer invariably look "through different kinds of lenses" as well (Helle 2007:183). Any notion of a direct gaze, then, is subject to vertiginous slippage.

Visuality in *Ariel* is not only associated with Plath's use of the written word to create images which sublimate her libidinal desire, but also claims the validity of two spheres of popular cultural life which inform the image of woman-as-spectator/spectacle. In particular, the *Ariel* poems present an interesting opportunity for an exploration of the body as a popular motif or public property in pornographic film and erotica. As this chapter seeks to illustrate, Plath's poems frequently operate on an erotic level in that "by means of suggestion, symbolism or allusion", they attempt "to arouse sexual feeling" (Rutherford 2007:25). And what of the pornographic, one might ask? In comparison with erotica, it has been suggested

that pornography has no artistic purpose other than to create a spectacle of sex to "induce sexual arousal" (McNair 2002:40) premised on the dehumanisation and degradation of the subject. Clearly, these are blurred areas, subject to much debate, and my analysis of Plath's poetry will imply that while the poems cannot be construed as pornography *per se*, the poet explores the effects of the possible subject/object positions associated with widely construed perversions such as sadism and masochism, exhibitionism, simulated rape and paedophilia. In addition, the prolific imaging of genitalia and sexual fluids in *Ariel* suggests that the verse transgresses propriety, embracing the pornographic, and, in doing so, blurs the boundary between high culture erotica and low culture pornography. In unsettling ways, Plath's literary affinity with these two cultural forms, straddling mind and body, challenges the dominantly held view that pornography and erotica are the preserve of a male culture centred on the exploitation of women.

The pornographic and erotic pleasures which the *Ariel* poems arouse as literary texts imply the centrality of the reader/viewer in the reception of Plath's work. In their discussion of her *oeuvre* and cultural bearing, Greenberg and Klaver (2009) posit the notion that 'close reading' or careful analyses of Plath's poems on the part of the reader/viewer constitutes a form of sexualised looking or voyeuristic pleasure. As a keyhole type space which invites our peering through it and into a highly charged space of linguistic play and bondage, a poem offers pleasure derived from a complex process of concealing and revealing. This 'close reading' has a potentially 'big screen' effect, as it enables an enlarged imaginative identification at some points. It even hyperbolically 'opens up' to a reader, going so defiantly far as to "transform" a "very personal pain ... into something grand, and something important to the whole culture" (Greenberg and Klaver 2009:192). The ripping aside of the curtains (indeed the very skin) can occur alongside sly 'screening' or veiling at other points in a Plath poem as a tactic to sustain attention, and to beguile. In these terms, the reader/viewer takes voyeuristic pleasure not only in blunt, overt pornographic showing or educating, but in the innately "slippery and sly" erotic quality of poetry itself (Greenberg and Klaver 2009:193). Notice, of course, that poetic language is seldom directly communicative or unmediated; it hides in metaphors, symbols and convoluted personal mythologies; it suddenly pulls back the curtain of consciousness then once again, provocatively, goads by hiding meaning. This is part of the allure or attraction of the *Ariel* poems, and the reader might well project into or fantasise onto as much as she or he apparently looks at.

As Gary Ross's 1998 film *Pleasantville* depicts, America in the 1950s was marked by a repressive sexual conservatism premised on the concept of the nuclear family, conformity

to surface propriety and the censure of taboo. As the film shows however, this conservative ethic was an unsustainable idealism: American media in the 1950s was rapidly creating a counterculture of profligacy, with a particular emphasis on sexuality. Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe were just some of the celebrities who embodied this moral shift and, in addition, publications such as *Playboy* circulated a heightened sense of the pleasures to be had from breaching taboo (McNair 2002). Plath pre-empts the sexual revolution of the 1960s in that her writing charts the struggle for women's re-definition of identity, and in many poems she rejects the conservatism of 1950s America in favour of a shrewd, dangerous liaison with the controversial. Moreover, in a move of gendered complexity, Plath assumes a satirical gaze over the power of the penis-phallus *and* engages in a gender role reversal by projecting herself into the male-dominated position behind the performative rhetoric of sexual power and visual mastery. In this sense, as a woman writer – and, together with Ted Hughes, part of a "writer-photographer pair" (Helle 2007:189) – Plath wields the literary camera instead of simply exhibiting femaleness in front of it. Thus, while *Ariel* caters to the reader/viewer's capacity for 'scandalous' titillation and intimate arousal, it also enables a more political stance, acting as a site of resistance in that its erotic and pornographic elements, variously latent and disclosed, work to unlock socially taboo areas or challenge the hypocritical *status quo* of the 1950s[8].

The eroticism in Plath's poetry may be theorised through Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the carnivalesque – an alternative politics of the body to the tenets of the official, patriarchal order. The *Ariel* poems exemplify facets of the profane, upside-down world of the carnival of sex which include excess, indulgence, parody, play, inversions, the grotesque, peculiar hybrids, and insatiable libidinous appetites. For example: in "Ariel", two women engage in a playful sex act, while in "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", the focus is on the female and male figures respectively as grotesque gender hybrids of sorts. In short, the carnival is a realm of existence where men and women are able to escape not merely the mundane world, but the constraining stratifications of received mores. This carnivalesque tension between norms and taboo has been identified as an important element of Plath's lived experience.

Stevenson, for instance, states that while Plath publicly acted the part of a "nice, bright, neat, gushy American student", she "Loved to *imagine* she was" a "whore, a vampire, a nymphomaniac" (1989:79), evidently chafing against the gendered and class constraints of her social position. This assertion is partially corroborated in *Ariel* with regard to Plath's predilection for role play, yet there are nuances and inaccuracies in the latter identities which Stevenson overlooks. As my discussion of the poems will show, Plath's assumption of the

carnivalesque identity of a vampire is used as an empowering fantasy to counter her guilt at her belief that she was, in actual life, a "drunken amorphic slut" and hence not altogether in control sexually (2000:212). There are, furthermore, gradations more than mere degradations in the behaviour of a "nymphomaniac", as the role combines a voracious sexual agency and appetite with complete loss of sexual control. My contention is that with such discrepancies in mind, Plath uses her poetry to illuminate the fraught dividing line between utopia and dystopia based on the politics of the gendered body and 'the gaze'.

Voyeurism entails the unseen, yet implicitly gendered camera's eye/I and, consequently, the vulnerability of the performative subject being watched. Lant refers to the masculinised eye/I of "discernment and *penetration*" (my italics) which is "associated with humiliating, public disclosure" (1993:634) and "a dangerous disturbance of the boundaries between exterior and interior" (Helle 2007:188). In particular, many of the female personae Plath embodies are hyperconscious of their own image(s) in the eyes of others – chiefly men who adopt a penetrating, controlling male gaze. Yet if we consider that they were written in a political and sociocultural context of surveillance, it is possible to appreciate that the *Ariel* poems also respond to the unspoken Cold War caveat 'I've got my eye on you' through a preoccupation with eye colour and the act of looking which, as Nelson affirms, registers "the pervasiveness of surveillance in ordinary life" (2002:80).

Let me offer a few brief examples from *Ariel*. In "Stings", the helplessness of the female speaker-as-object of an undisclosed voyeuristic 'I' is palpable: "A third person is watching. / He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me". Evidently, the speaker is at the mercy of a male eye, an unsettling "emblem of specularity and surveillance" (Britzolakis 2002:185) which monitors the workings of her "honey-machine" that opens "like an industrious virgin". In "Tulips", the protagonist similarly alludes to her self-consciousness and vulnerability, the self a dehumanised, forcibly staged object of the voyeuristic eye(s) in the operating theatre: "I am nobody", "I have given ... my body to surgeons", "Nobody watched me before, now I am watched". This breaching of the body surface by the surgeon in the patriarchal domain of the hospital is, as Nelson (2006) avers, a metaphor for the agenda of 'exposure' favoured by confessional verse, yet in the context of "Tulips", the coercive exposure of the female speaker's secrets by a man, or men, indicates that her confessions are the result of a calculated penetration of her skin rather than true admissions or revelations from her heart. In "Medusa", Plath's confessional 'I' is situated within another location of Foucauldian disciplinary complex and views itself, instead, through camera-style metaphors of maternal spying, policing, and interrogation: "Overexposed, like an X-ray". Here, the

mother figure's propensity to pry into her daughter's private life is compared to a bodily intrusion. These examples of the intrusiveness of the gaze as variously male and female, and occurring variously within the public, male arena and private, female zone, somewhat disrupt the male/female and public/private boundaries. In doing so, "the line between voluntary self-disclosure and forced confession" is obscured, thereby contesting the idea of a communal private sphere for post-war women (Bryant 2004:256). Moreover, as Bayley points out, while "Plath declared she would 'counteract' this rhetoric of scrutiny and surveillance", it is "typical of her process that she coloured herself with the very language and processes she reviled in order to debunk them" (2009:547).

This uneasy public/private relation is replicated in a number of *Ariel* poems via allusions to the erotic female body and confession as sadomasochistic spectacle (Bellour 1979) whereby Plath "mockingly appropriates 1950s myths of female" satisfaction (Britzolakis 2002:187) such as characterise "the *Ladies' Day* world of true romance and happy domesticity", mythologies so perverse, Britzolakis argues, as to comprise a form of "socially sanctioned female masochism" (2002:164), the end of which is death. Sex and death, importunate active/passive motifs in pornographic film and Plath's actual life, are intertwined in the theatrical "Lady Lazarus" in such a manner that they fuel an erotically-charged climax which blurs artistic consummation and death as life's apogee: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well. / I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real. / I guess you could say I've a call". As a living embodiment of the "big strip tease" of death, the speaker seemingly savours her ability to enact the process of dying, "wooing a public with her [atypical] female cynicism" (Helal 2004:95). Her seductive serial punishments of the female body demonstrate how she, as a stripper, is a voyeuristic image in the eyes of the dissolute (male) audience members and even perhaps in the view of the complicit reader. After all, like Plath, like any woman, Lady Lazarus should ideally enter the public eye "as a sexualized woman or not at all" (Helal 2004:78).

There exists, however, a variable relationship of power between the one who displays and the one who looks, as women occupy shifting roles as mistresses of the erotic spectacle, vehicles of a performative erotica, and masochistic victims of the voyeur's gaze. In particular, women's influence over the erotic spectacle overlaps with Modleski's (1988) argument that the refractive or returned gaze of the voyeuristic object creates a destabilisation of power between spectator and spectacle, as each oscillates between male/female and subject/object gender roles. This ambiguous position of the female performer is elaborated on by Belinda Budge in her film scholarship. She explains that woman's "image dominates that of man",

"often controlling the camera movement" and "directing the gaze of the viewer" in spite of "being presented as an object of desire, at least for the viewer" (1988:109). This hints at the possibility of a female gaze which cannot simply be consigned to the controlling masculinised paradigm outlined by Mulvey (1989).

This indistinctness and instability of the gaze is played out in "Lady Lazarus" through Plath's emphasis on the act of stripping as a deliberate means of empowerment, a female transgression of a traditional taboo in a consumer-driven culture:

> There is a *charge*
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a *charge*
> For the hearing of my heart–
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a *charge*, a very large *charge*,
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood. (my italics)

Here, the sexual charge of physical affect is conflated with a financial charge, indicating that the enthralling female-as-object(/subject) maintains a certain dominatrix-like authority over the crowd. This power play is carried in the repetition of the word and in the off-beat rhythm, and it disproves Lant's deduction that "To strip is to seduce; it is not to assert oneself sexually or psychologically" (1993:653). The commodification of Lady Lazarus' 'piece of flesh' extends to the fragmentary remains of the Plath archive and the public 'nakedness' of confession – an act which reveals to the public eye not only forbidden flesh in its material capacity, but also the forbidden and reified *word* in the form of confessional poetry. Plath's high/low cultural speaker, a destabilising force for the audience's male gaze, finds her "fulfilment in the worship" of the "film or pop star, a cult vehicle of male fantasy who induces mass hysteria" and "hunger for 'confessional' revelations" (Britzolakis 2002:155). Here, the poet's portrayal of Lady Lazarus points to a pleasurable female/female looking that cannot be reduced to a masculine heterosexual gaze in that it is based on neither identification nor erotic desire. Jackie Stacey (1988) conceptualises this looking as the female spectator's *active* fascination based on the difference or otherness of the watched female star with whom the spectator endeavours to exchange identities and to emulate.

The ambiguity of Lady Lazarus' influential, self-chosen stardom is further revealed through her allusions to a rape. An anonymous ulterior force, possibly postwar mass culture, is clearly in control: "The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see // Them unwrap me

hand and foot". Here, shifting between active and passive roles, the speaker (akin to the biblical Lazarus whose binding is unwrapped) is portrayed as a miraculous presence/present whose entertaining "unwrap[ping]" of death or constructed image of desire is a gift-like titillation for the visually hungry, pansexual crowd. In this manner, the speaker colludes pleasurably yet sardonically in her masochistic cultural objectification as a spectacle for the audience's enjoyment (Britzolakis 2002). This adversarial audience is similarly complicit in the speaker's public exploitation, as it goads her by paying to watch her gory spectacle and is, as outlined above, mesmerised by her stage act: "the same brute / Amused shout: // 'A miracle!' / That knocks me out". Nonetheless, if we wish to persist with a negative reading, it is not only the speaker whose humanity has been stripped from her, but also that of the "peanut-crunching crowd" through the voyeuristic pleasure its members derive from her sadomasochistic act.

This automated existence related to Lady Lazarus' "art" of dying is further implied when she states sarcastically, "It's easy enough to do it in a cell". Here, Plath's speaker "performs the delicate balance between [female] vulnerability and [male] wit" (Helal 2004:96), which is also, perhaps, commodity culture set in relation to intellect. Lady Lazarus is evidently imprisoned in an ambivalent role; she makes the most of it. Being obliged, she obliges and, while forced, she becomes a force to be reckoned with. The poem's sadomasochistic imagery is accentuated through an allusion to cage dancing or stripping in a cage. While Lady Lazarus' melancholia is connected with a thematic of perversity and artifice or role-playing, it is also "marked as a cultural prerogative for male subjectivity" (Britzolakis 2002:124), which shows how Plath once again adopts a male gaze in relation to the sexual activity of her incarcerated protagonist. The fact that Lady Lazarus sees herself as a *to-be-looked-at* image in other people's eyes creates within her a feeling of entrapment. Used to control or dominate another person, the gaze as a type of Cold War surveillance device regulates its object's sexual activities. Given that she performs her role as a public showpiece in a "cell", coupled with the transgressive, taboo nature of her act, Lady Lazarus wears, in Bataillean terms, the bestial guise of a caged sexual animal – a caged 'body' of work – that one's public persona, controlled by the gaze of a "peanut-crunching" patriarchal society, strives to tame and contain.

The *Ariel* poems predict the late 1980s and 1990s, where images presented women as assertive and dynamic holders of consumer sovereignty and sexual citizenship – above all in the political and intellectual spheres. In "Lady Lazarus", this emancipation occurs in the climactic "strip tease" act in which the ambivalently objectified protagonist breaks free from

her caged gender identity by transforming into a self-styled 'bad girl' or pop-cultural *femme fatale* who rises "Out of the ash" to "eat men like air" (McNair 2002). Here, Plath not only parodies woman as the proverbial 'man eater' with her "red hair", but also shows how the sexually confrontational Lady Lazarus, with her carnivalesque cannibalistic craving to "eat men", rejects the patriarchal gender code that women ought to be 'ladies' or exemplars of what Mulvey calls "a passive sexuality" (1989:35). Plath laments, "I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled" (2000a:20). Her enactment of the vampiric in Lady Lazarus' monstrously grotesque persona implies that she hopes to consume men as their gaze consumes women. (It is also, of course, to enact a "death-defying death-embracing" authority, that of the "castrating female" writer whose power as 'priestess' of Art challenges the protocols of a male literary tradition [Attwood 2003:88].)

The Gothicised revenge plot sees Lady Lazarus turning her erotic masquerade (Britzolakis 2002) of femininity against her oppressors in the ultimate undressing of her predatory, subversive female self. She identifies with men's imposing supremacy of 'nakedness' (Lant 1993) and exteriorises this creative and gender-based 'confession' in masculine form. In this manner, Plath plays into the tension around the assumption that female authorship in the 1950s implied "either feeding mass audiences with consumable pulp or renouncing emotional and sexual fulfilment" (Britzolakis 2002:75). The scenario in the poem is an emasculating one, as it exemplifies the threat and violence associated with an idolised female performance or women's entry into the public sphere in the twentieth century while also drawing "attention to the cultural production of such fantasies" (Britzolakis 2002:114). One is likewise reminded of Michael P. Rogin's discussion of the Cold War era, in which fear of the political and ideological 'other' also constituted an implied apprehension of the "sinister power of the female in society" (1987:258).

Lady Lazarus' active female sexuality therefore effects a re-distribution of power in terms of gender roles denoted by the Mulveyan paradigm of 'man as bearer of the look' and 'woman as spectacle'. As such, the androgynous[9] speaker-as-aggressor is no longer a meek receptacle for gendered victimisation, but a resonant public exhibition and a potentially demystifying model for gender relations. At this juncture, I wish to point out that 'androgyny' as a term in "Lady Lazarus" (although it is not limited only to this poem) is not necessarily fixed by equal quantities of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'. This hazy fusion of genders, the inability to locate the gendered self, shows how Plath, biologically a female, overturns or

refutes dictates of anatomy in the ascribing of male/female roles. That said, in spite of her destabilisation of fixed gender identities through a pronounced gender consciousness, however, Plath still claims the validity of the male/female binary through her allusions to androgyny and male/female dichotomies of power and subordination, active and passive sexualities. Thus, despite an ideal for which she strives, 'identity' is never entirely genderless in Plath's imagination.

To return to "Lady Lazarus": through her persona's sexual agency, Plath attempts "to recapture the authorial agency that is lost with celebrity status" (Helal 2004:88) and discloses the performativity of gender itself and, in this manner, "destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire" (Butler 1999:177). Nevertheless, Plath's poems illustrate, very strikingly, that nakedness and display "for the female subject" may be "experienced ... as yet another barrier between the self and the world or even between the authorial self and the persona it describes". In other words, the unclothed or confessional female body – a performative of Plath's exhibitionist identity – is not to be considered some authentic "shimmering emblem" of glorious self, but "merely another false and falsifying gesture", 'nude' as opposed to naked (Lant 1993:624-25). In this regard, Lady Lazarus' staged roles of male/female, commodity/consumer, and spectator/spectacle, show how the gender 'act' – central to the mythology of 1950s femininity – becomes the woman's identity.

As a number of commentators have observed, Plath possessed an acute sense of her own existence as a profound drama or 'act'. In 1959, for example, she referred to her life as a "great, stark, bloody play" that was "acting itself out over and over again behind the sunny façade" of her and Ted Hughes' "daily rituals, birth, marriage, death" (2000a:456). The vulnerability and violence intimated by Plath in the script of her domestic life is mirrored through refraction in her poetry. Consider the poem "Pursuit", where the speaker feels herself the prey of a man-panther's sexual advances, even as she is also tempted by lust: "I shut my doors on that dark guilt, / I bolt the door, each door I bolt. / Blood quickens"[10]. As in "Lady Lazarus", these lines present the female speaker as both the victim of a devouring male appetite ("He eats, and still his need seeks food") and, in refractive gaze mode, a predatory mistress of the erotic spectacle. She therefore experiences an ambiguous push-pull tension between acquiescence to the man-animal's sexual rapacity and guilt at her potential sadomasochistic transgression and complicity in her sexual objectification by consumption. The latter brings to mind Cuenca's discussion of 1950s popular cultural forms such as movies and pulp fiction, which "constructed threatening images for women who deviated from the norm". Above all, with their lurid cover art, "Pulp novels repeatedly paralleled women's

sexual freedom with their eventual suffering of violence and with their meeting an untimely death" (2009:183). "Pursuit" suggests how, despite the fact that Plath frequently uses her poetry to flout a number of social taboos, these anathemas were nevertheless deeply embedded in her consciousness and she anticipated punishment for her transgressions. (Here, too, it might be added that Plath's sense of her own trespass and yet rights when it came to the act of poetry writing also evinces something of this ambivalent positioning.)

Stevenson suggests that the panther in "Pursuit" is a metaphor for Plath's "own libidinous double, the deep self full of violence and fury she was suppressing under her poised and capable appearance" (1989:78). Lant, however, more convincingly attributes this duplicity to Plath's androgynous writing style: "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 writing" (1993:645). As Margaret Uroff has pointed out, of "Pursuit", Plath states that one "consumes oneself" through intense, creative living (1980:69). This is substantiated in the following comment made by Plath about Ted Hughes: "in my mind I am ripped to pieces by the words he wields and welds" (2000b:142). Plath's connection between wounding, writing and heterosexual eroticism tends to link the mutilating, consuming effects of words or creativity with the mutilating, consuming repercussions of the male gaze as a cultural form of female subjugation (Mulvey 1989 and Bellour 1979).

Plath's actual and imaginative involvement in sadomasochistic acts shows how she shifts between gendered perspectives. Her dismemberment of her physical and confessional 'body' indicates that, in some ways, she *wants* to use a fragmenting, mutilating male gaze to break down received notions of the Female. To quote Plath: "I am part man" (2000b:23). While there is a perhaps perverse kind of gratification, for the poet, in her ability to disfigure herself or de-configure her female identity by putatively performing as if through the eyes and words of a male rather than a female, she also rebels against it. In other words, she distances herself from the gruesome effects of a male gaze on her body while she is also, firstly, a female object complicit in her own masochism inflicted by a male gaze and, secondly, a female subject who views her own image(s) through a Mulveyan masculinised female gaze. These volatile visual perspectives illustrate how Plath uses masculinity as a foundation for personal and professional acceptance. This assertion is granted an even more ambiguous quality in "Daddy", where sadomasochism as a defining feature of man-woman gender and sexual relations looks more closely at the male figure's roles as subject and object of violence. Here, once again, Plath unsettles Mulvey's (1989) binary of male subject and

female object, as the male figure comes to fulfil both roles. In addition, the poem underlines the tension experienced by the female speaker in her conflicting active/passive, male/female desires to dominate and be dominated (Lewallen 1988).

"Daddy" is often treated as *the* exemplar of Plath's work. In the infantilised voice adopted in the poem, Plath projects herself into the persona of the indistinct 'I' whose relationship with her father is founded not on an innocent idolatry, but rather a sadomasochistic tension and forbidden eroticism. Significantly, one of Plath's college boyfriends, Richard Sassoon, revealed that he wanted to "play daddy" to a naughty girl and intimated that Plath was the prime candidate for such a role as she was the only girl whom he wanted "to please and punish" (Hayman 1991:73). These disclosures hint at the incest taboo implicit in "Daddy" in that Sassoon alludes to a sexual and gendered role playing between himself and Plath as father and daughter respectively, though whether this was a reciprocated fantasy or his alone I cannot determine. Described by the speaker as "A man in black with a Meinkampf look", the father figure in "Daddy" participates in a twisted marriage ceremony with his daughter ("I do, I do"). At this juncture, historically familiar torture tactics such as "the rack" and "the screw" are flamboyantly conflated, by Plath, with an incestuous liaison between father and daughter. Plath's speaker's body is, in this regard, associated "with an eroticized pain and deprivation, the mark scored on a flesh that is prey to torture instruments and sadistic devices" (Britzolakis 2002:81).

In the poem, the speaker authoritatively orders her father to "lie back now" as precursor to an act of oral sex to which the reader-as-voyeur is witness (for more on the mouth-as-wound/er see further in this section, and chapter three). This image is sleazy, yes, but it also attests to a form of female agency and power which, premised on the expressive mouth as organ of language rather than only sexual intention, curiously enables the persona to speak taboo. This is later conflated with an image of the father figure lying dead in the final stanza: "Daddy, you can lie back now. // There's a stake in your fat black heart". This pornographic depiction of "daddy" elliptically reverses phallic imagery in that the daughter's stake in this affair, her language, is a phallic symbol that has been plunged into the core of the male's equivalent of the female genitalia.

Understood through Britzolakis' theory of the theatre of mourning, the structure of the bourgeois nuclear family in "Daddy" illustrates how Plath's "exorcism of the oppressive parent is also an attack on herself", which confirms "the masochistic 'wound' of femininity insisted upon by her culture" (2002:213). The sexual penetration and murder of the female by the male (and a powerful male culture) shows how, firstly, in the murder of her

father/husband, the speaker hopes to kill the female aspects ("heart") within her own physical and confessional body in the ultimate demonstration of abjection (Kristeva 1982). This murder, in turn, evinces the mutilation or fracturing of the speaker's 'I' akin to the ramifications of the phallic symbols of the "arrow" and "splinter" in the respective speakers' eyes/I's in the poems "Ariel" and "The Eye-Mote". The use of a phallic "stake" to murder the female aspects of her 'self' illustrates how Plath uses masculinity as a basis for acceptance. This point is evocative of Plath's conception of creativity as a sexual urge, a "violently assertive act" that places the poet in a "cruel position of masculine power" (Lant 1993:644).

In "Daddy", the daughter persona clearly derives sadomasochistic pleasure from the rape/murder of the husband/father figure whose power and agency are virtually absorbed into her virile 'masculine' self. By the conclusion of the poem, it is the speaker's eye that is voyeuristically focused on the objectified, dead male figure, thereby deconstructing the myth of the father's entitlement to dominate and marginalise (Markey 1993). Redolent of an androgynous stance, Plath's speaker in "Daddy" appropriates a mutilating male gaze (conveyed through the "stake" in the "heart" and dismembered body parts such as a foot, toe, head, moustache, cleft chin and bones) to 'amputate' her father/husband from her psyche and usurp his power. (Interesting enough, Bundtzen indicates that Plath composed "Daddy" on 12 October 1962 – the anniversary of her father's 1940 leg amputation [2006:40].) The latter concerns the heterosexual, patriarchal domination he wielded with his own fragmenting, entrapping "eye" and its dilated ("black") 'pupil' that reduced the daughter to abased victim. Here then, in a sense, Plath's use of a male gaze denotes her need to appropriate for her creative purposes the 'male'.

The speaker's female gaze in "Daddy" clearly vacillates between Mulvey and Bellour's male/female and sadistic/masochistic perspectives yet, in doing so, offers a gateway towards a more comprehensive theorisation of women's spectator subjectivity. The fracturing or splitting indicated by the aforementioned binaries engenders a fragmentation of the eye/I that is not fixed on the idea of a "fully constituted subject" and a "predetermined gender identification" (Stacey 1988:118), but plays with shifting, contradictory and precarious identifications within subjectivity. I would venture that Plath pre-empts theory and gender debates of the late 1980s and 1990s, during which the idea of 'the gaze' was transformed from a violatory pattern used by men to victimise and sexually objectify women, to a more productively unstable inclusivity that could be equally appropriated by both sexes.

As a woman poet, Plath frequently constructs narcissistic images of men which contribute to and mock the cultural construction of masculinity as a form of sexual

objectification (McNair 2002). This contradicts the position of the male gaze that Mulvey originally posited, and Mackinnon rightfully asserts that for "Mulvey, it appears untenable to believe that a male can be in the position of erotic spectacle, the to-be-looked-at" object of the gaze (1999:13). This blind spot in Mulvey's work is a potent lack when it comes to Plath's representation of male figures in her poetry. In the 1950s, glossy photographs of provocatively posed young men (Clark Gable and Cary Grant, for example) in men's magazines were not uncommon, which spurred the more sexually explicit images that characterise contemporary media in which men's bodies have become predictable sites of voyeurism or eroticised looking for both male and female audiences.

Lisa Tickner underscores this paradigm in her reference to "the glamourised nude", evocative of celebrity culture, who came to be "accepted by both sexes as part of the natural language of the media" (1987:237). Here, 'the gaze' as enigma involves women looking at men, women looking at other women, men looking at other men, and men looking at themselves in a variety of subject/object interplays, and the fluid boundaries of such pleasure are not so much transgressive of the female/female voyeurism underpinning women's magazines but an inevitable release of the very instabilities which fundamentally underpin the supposed male gaze which female spectators were assumed to adopt when looking at other women. Several *Ariel* poems suggest, for instance, that Plath (or her poetic avatars) enjoyed being physically and visually dominated by pin-up men or macho sex-gods (Plath in fact claimed, for example, that she loved Ted Hughes' "virile, deep, banging poems"), yet also enjoyed her possession of such men as "magnificent", "handsome", "brilliant" male archetypes (Hayman 1991:90).

A performative male sexuality provides the thematic focus of the sadomasochistic "Death & Co." where, as discussed in chapter one and to voyeuristic effect, death is a fascinatingly revolting force. Plath's speaker plays the pornographer who derives an ambiguous voyeuristic pleasure from the second character's socially taboo, allegedly perverse onanistic act. Given his status as a "Bastard" who is "Masturbating a glitter", the second character is a hedonistic prospective lover whose repugnance is incongruously tempered by his erotic allure: "He wants to be loved". He finally transforms into a vision of the speaker's death: "The dead bell, / The dead bell. // Somebody's done for". Death is therefore both a source of erotic enthralment and danger for the speaker which, coupled with the sexual act of masturbation and the aesthetic and voyeuristic value of poetry, points to a bodily, Bakhtinian relinquishment of mundane realities such as domestic or office work.

In "Gigolo", Plath parodies and, to invert Mulvey's gender logic in terms of its focus on the female as sole sexual object, fetishises the 1950s cultural focus on male virility and men's propensity for narcissism and sexualised self-display or *exposure*: "the smiles of women / Gulp at my bulk". This poem is wonderfully playful in terms of sound and image. The male projects himself into mere smiles, supposing the women open mouthed at the sight of his visible masculinity, and imagines his egotistical enormity fantasised into bedroom scenarios of oral sex. The word "bulk" is especially evocative of the hyperbolically enlarged 'hard to swallow' pornographic penis and evidence of Plath-as-poet's appropriation of a male gaze to objectify men's rather than women's genitalia. The gigolo's 'feminisation' – his assumption of the role of voyeuristic and fetishistic object who is viewed by women – does, however, remain locked within the same male/female and subject/object dichotomies extrapolated by Mulvey. As a misogynistic, carnival-of-sex caricature of manhood, the homoerotic gigolo is clearly not the only one who is pleased at the fact that he is physically well-endowed and hence attractive.

Even Plath's passing treatment of the women carries criticism of their complicity in this endless, vicious cycle of cultural narcissism. The smiling women are, like the gigolo, objects of scorn, complicit in this willing partnership and thus reducing themselves to a repository of sociocultural female fantasy: the status of exploited, commercialised bodies that satisfy the opposite sex on physical terms. The role of the voyeur is therefore enacted by multiple identities, all of whom adopt male/female gazes: Plath-as-poet and the reader (who view the gigolo's genitalia and the women's breasts); the gigolo (who views the women and himself); and the sexually avid women (who view the gigolo). This awkward concord denotes an inability to pinpoint the female gaze entirely or conclusively, hence bespeaking its fragmentation, which alternately *en*ables the elusive power of female spectatorship and *dis*ables any promise of a holistic, 'secure' female viewership. The notion of a voyeuristic contract also presages a society premised on the erotic spectacle – another facet of celebrity culture, if you will. "Gigolo" not only poses the question "who is looking and what gaze is being used?" but seems to parallel Rose's claim of the paradox involved in public stardom. In seeking an audience to bolster one's self-worth on an erotic level, as Plath does, the integral presence of the spectator, any spectator, in the projection of a person's erotic self is made blatantly obvious. For Rose, voyeuristic spectacles or eroticised, sexualised celebrities "are the people required by us to embody or to carry the weight of the question: who are we meant to be performing to, or what are we doing when performing to an invisible audience?" (2003:204).

This notion of the public spectacle as an erotic hypercharge evokes connotations of a sexual orgy, the most extreme form of sexual frenzy, encompassing group activity that complicates the public/private binary. In the conventionally male role of pornographer, Plath explores a variety of 'perversions' in her poetry. In "Gigolo", for instance, an orgy is implied when the title character, in erotomanic fashion, declares that he is "Mill[ing] a litter of breasts like jellyfish". "Lesbos" shows Plath's speaker involved in an antagonistic *ménage a trois* with her husband and a woman, an exchange which conflates heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual orientations. In "Berck-Plage", the erotic activity of a group of women in "Obscene bikinis" is suggestive of sexual licentiousness. Plath's use of a pornographic male gaze in relation to such activity demonstrates how her androgynous stance as a woman poet permits her to destabilise the notion that pornography is solely the preserve of men. In doing so, she attempts to enforce a male/female equality of sexualised looking by unsettling the power hierarchy of an arena most overtly dominated by male viewership and yet, at the same time, Plath endorses this commanding male subjectivity by, essentially, becoming 'male'. Furthermore, her 'public' portrayal of the 'private' fusion of bodies through wanton sexual intercourse between men and/or women breaches the male/female divide that typifies worldly and domestic space respectively.

The body in its anatomical capacity raises the question of physical beauty, a topic which Plath translates and mediates in her work. While chapter one introduced this idea, I hope, here, to show how the poet's interiorisation of "the surveillance of an integrated male observer" (van Wersch 2001:193), conveyed through her habitual viewing of her female personae in a sadistic, mutilating way, prompts a number of paradoxical positions: reinforcement, reproduction and/or undermining of patriarchal power in line with a heterosexual conception of female beauty. In many Plath poems, for instance, she eroticises and aestheticises the female body through blatant poses, gestures, dress or undress, which include: flowing hair ("Lady Lazarus"); exposed arms, legs, and mid-riff ("Ariel"); short, figure-hugging pants or skirts ("Lesbos" and "Poppies in July"); and high heels and legs which move in a way that accentuates the bearer's curves ("Ariel"). Plath expresses the link between anatomy and gender performativity in the *Journals*: "So I sit here, smiling as I think in my fragmentary way: 'Woman is but an engine of ecstasy, a mimic of earth from the ends of her curled hair to her red-lacquered nails'" (2000a:20).

In "Berck-Plage", emphasis is placed on the obscene female body as an anachronistic voyeuristic feature in the bleak, conservative locale. The source of the gaze is uncertain, as it shifts from first to third person, and merges the identities of the male priest and Plath's

presumably female speaker (Britzolakis 2002). An attempt to mask 'deviant' sexual behaviour is implied in the lines "Behind the concrete bunkers / Two lovers unstick themselves". In conjunction with this quotation, the speaker and/or priest observe, as mentioned earlier, "Obscene bikinis" which "hide in the dunes". In "Berck-Plage", the description of the women's fetishistic "Breasts and hips" as "a confectioner's sugar / Of little crystals, titillating the light" points to their carnival-of-sex status as valuable food ripe for men's visual consumption. Here, the visual-aural pun on 'tits' and "titillating" plays on the reader's capacity for voyeuristic sexual arousal in terms of a "gendered attractionist aesthetic" (Moseley 2002:40).

Moreover, the speaker refers to the priest who is "Following the coffin on its flowery cart like a beautiful woman, / A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips // Storming the hilltop". Evidently, the voyeur (at once Plath and reader) is overwhelmed by a terrain of an abundant, peculiarly powerful and yet degraded female sexuality; the vocabulary breaks the female body into suggestive parts, spotlighting a sexualised, mutilated female form in keeping with the "surreal landscape of disease and mutilation" (Britzolakis 2002:92). Plath uses "Berck-Plage" to underscore her adoption of a male gaze in relation to other women's bodies as extensions of her own, which once again highlights her ambiguous gender identity as a woman poet. In the *Journals*, she similarly adopts an anatomically mutilating male gaze when she reveals her awareness of other women's physiology: "I remember Liz, her face white, delicate as an ash on the wind; her red lips staining the cigarette; her full breasts under the taut black jersey" (2000a:20).

Plath's focus on the physical dimensions or form of the female body is reinforced in her final archived visual piece, a 1960 newspaper cutting collage in which she "places a shapely woman in a bathing suit within commodity culture" (Connors 2007:72). The alignment of a tangible consumer and commodity culture with the image of woman as an object of the gaze is granted prominence in "The Munich Mannequins". The title characters symbolise a perversion of the female body premised on the connection between the 'sexual' and the 'commodified' – an issue raised by Bryant (2002) and represented by the commodified role of the glamour girl discussed in chapter one. The mannequins "Unloos[e] their moons" or menstrual blood, the definitive sign of womanliness. This attrition of the sexual in connection with childbirth is conflated with the fact that the mannequins are evocative of life-size Barbie dolls that sport full busts and are, in this manner, eroticised. As one woman relates of her mother's reluctance to buy her a Barbie doll when she was a child,

"I feel that she had an innate sense of Barbie as being somehow illicit" (Rutherford 2007:115).

This feeling of sexual unease was common in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Barbie doll was thought to be a potential threat to the moral order of the domestic sphere (Rutherford 2007). The mannequins underline the so-called ideal, un-domesticated woman's body which patriarchal culture dictates and which Plath strove to attain – unscarred, taut and full breasted with a slim, proportioned figure to please the voyeuristic male eye. This erotic quintessence of perfection, which sees its culmination in the oddly proportioned Barbie doll, is presented as sterile: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children". The mannequins' physical flawlessness is aligned with the goal of cosmetic surgery which, as intimated in the previous chapter, produces carbon copies of different women. Britzolakis' statement could well apply to the sexually and literally 'dead' mannequins: "In becoming an 'Image', the feminine figure" is subjected to "a process of aesthetic petrification" (2002:88). On a similar slant, albeit in her discussion of Dorothy Parker's poetry, Helal maintains: "If the weighty presence of literary tradition reminds the persona she is meant to be the *object* of poetic contemplation, and not the agent of its creation", Plath "emphasizes and ridicules this phenomenon by rendering her protagonist immobile" (2004:92). As a poet, Plath's gender-complex perspective in "The Munich Mannequins" is hence played out through her accommodation or complicit application of a male gaze in relation to women's anatomy and her antonymous rejection of its 'deadening' effects.

Plath's questioning and subversion of the tenets of women's acceptable corporeality and sexual behaviour was clearly not affirmed by Cold War popular culture (Cuenca 2009). Cuenca argues, using Butler's ideas, that in "Cold War America, a suitably beautiful and chaste female body was a body that mattered, whereas other forms of female corporeality were considered abject lumps of flesh ready to be deformed and/or killed" (2009:184). Breast prostheses and breast augmentation (rare in 1950s western culture with the exception of Hollywood) are physical manifestations of this disjuncture and reinforce the assumption that "female identity is nothing more than those attributes of the body which denote sexuality to the [*heterosexual*] male gaze" (Spence 2001:178). In a number of the *Ariel* poems, the mutilated woman's body guarantees her status as a fetish in the eyes of men (Britzolakis 2002).

"The Applicant" explores a bodily self-alienation imposed on women by a fragmenting, anatomising male gaze that is actively sadistic in its 'horror film' capacity to dismember and mutilate the female form. This gaze essentially threatens to reduce the female body to an

unfeeling, artificial sexuality of "Rubber breasts" and a "rubber crotch" – both of which, like the protagonist's breasts in "Edge" ("Pitcher[s] of milk, now empty"), are removed from their biological functions of feeding babies and giving birth respectively, in order to function as the rebus of male fantasy. Britzolakis, in this regard, refers to a culture "saturated and erotically charged with simulacra" (2002:142). The constructed quality of femaleness in the poem, designed to improve a woman's looks, is, ironically, not blemish-free but perfectly imperfect. The female body, somewhat akin to the Plath archive, is hence commercialised, de-sexed and rendered defective (Bryant 1999).

Plath uses "The Applicant" to illustrate the fact that a reduced, objectified image of woman's self is created if she looks at herself through men's eyes, that is, through the gaze of the ostensibly male applicant: "You have a hole, it's a poultice / You have an eye, it's an image". This line mocks the "declarative bombast of outrageous sales claims" (Nelson 2006:30), thus challenging the notion of woman as a consumer product, and also depicts the body of the mechanised or unnatural female persona as merely a constituent of the male figure. That is, she is a fetishistic "poultice" to his "hole", a warped "image" to his authoritative, all-powerful male "eye"/I, and an objectified 'Stepford wife' *cum* Barbie doll on which the applicant writes his desires and needs as part of the commercialised marriage contract: "Naked as paper to start // But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, / In fifty, gold. / A living doll everywhere you can look. / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk". Here, Plath is mocking other women's and her own two-dimensional state of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1989:19). As "a commodity-spectacle to be consumed" (Britzolakis 2002:151), the woman 'on sale' for marriage fulfils the potential, antithetical roles of intelligent machine and glamorous 'sex slave', a home-cooked meal whose "rubbery" gender identity is eaten away by her husband – this act the antithesis of Lady Lazarus', who eventually enacts the role of the 'consumer'. Bryant, interestingly enough, suggests that the idea of incompleteness extends to the buyer/husband figure who has "something missing". Hence, the adman-auctioneer is "Selling young men's need for wholeness as much as the product/wife" – an incompleteness which extends to the poem's structure: each stanza ends with a question that leads into the next stanza (1999:26).

"Gigolo" is another example of Plath's focus on a reductive culture synonymous with the plasticised aesthetic of Hollywood, as the speaker's male gaze transforms the sexually enticing naked women he views into a "litter of breasts", a casually disembodied, even mutilated slew of body parts – both "strewn about" personal objects and "public property" (Bayley 2009:557). These women, extensions of Plath and objectified by her interiorisation

of a male gaze, mock the reader-voyeur's capacity for visual pleasure negotiated through the eyes of men. Moreover, Plath's literary representation of the sexualised 'body-in-pieces' mirrors Rose's (1991) conception of the Plath archive as an extrapolated disaggregated 'body' comprising multiple drafts, lists of topics for poems, (in/ex)cluded journal entries, and visual collages, among other remains (Helle 2005). The creation of this mutilated entity is in large part due to the exclusion of "morally objectionable or psychologically charged fragments" from Plath's 'body' of published work (Helle 2005:644). In many ways, the reduction of the 'female' Plath archive to 'waste', errata, and gossip presents another version of celebrity as a cultural discourse. Furthermore, while the archive's fragmented body caters to a male gaze, it also paradoxically represents the antithesis of a masculine ideal of femininity, as it represents that which is marginal or missing compared to the pure, aesthetic product (Helle 2005).

In *Ariel*, this 'purity' of product is conceptualised in terms of the value attached to the sexual 'wholesomeness' of the woman's body-as-product. Plath's ambiguous relationship with her own eroticism was revealed to a psychiatrist in a 1959 retrospective discussion in which she not only confessed to a premarital life marked by promiscuity, but peppered her yearning for marriage – a purportedly monogamous union – with a latent eroticism: she hoped to "live hard and good with a hard, good man" (Hayman 1991:71). Plath's possible guilt at her sexual 'taintedness' is intimated in the poem "Cut" ("Dirty girl") and *The Bell Jar*, where Doreen's vomit on the hotel carpet seems to Esther "an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature" (1966:21). This notion of the corrupted body is addressed in a number of poems in which, in the role of the speaker, Plath interiorises the chauvinistic double-standard that affords men sexual liberty and deplores women who similarly avail themselves. This malign social ploy was clearly designed to keep young women in line with preferred social views of femaleness. In the *Journals*, Plath comments:

> And yet does it not all come again to the fact that it is a man's world? For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn his nose up at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man? (2000a:77)

The culturally-constructed taint associated with women's sexuality, as opposed to the 'pure' aesthetic product, is developed in "Fever 103°". Plath's speaker, who specifically assumes a 'prostitute' role for the addressee-as-audience (Britzolakis 2002), seeks transcendence from

what she deems her sordid, interminable sexual escapades. She adopts a male gaze in that she views her role in their relationship as tantamount to a powerless female prostitution: "Not you, nor him // Not him, nor him". Britzolakis aligns this prostitution with Plath's poetic style, remarking that she "seems [self-consciously] to *consume* culture as a random assortment of styles which circulate promiscuously" (2002:138). These styles refer most notably to Plath's uneasy combination of high and low cultural forms, which range from Modernist poetry to women's magazines. Based on this eclectic synthesis, the speaker in "Fever 103°" makes several references to corporeal purity: "Pure? What does it mean?", "I am too pure for you or anyone", "I // Am a pure acetylene / Virgin". These lines convey 'purity' in terms of a commanding masculinisation or godly virginity – a rhetorical mask which the speaker envisages she will wear, and thereby remodel herself, through the cleansing effects of baptismal "water" and the allegorical deaths of her "whore petticoat" selves.

The sexual body, especially that of the female, is presented in wounding, impure terms, and shows how Plath trespasses "into the private precincts of home life in order to expose fear of the enemy within" (Bayley 2009:550). The speaker refers to the "bodies of adulterers", and sheets that "grow heavy as a lecher's kiss", "Your body / Hurts me". This wounding, impurity and disease is linked with femininity itself and its writtenness – most often in mass cultural 'female' forms – as a passive, fatal role (Britzolakis 2002). Plath views the antidote to physical and linguistic disease – the latter a "deliquescent, flaccid, and 'slushy'" female language – as an "austerity and bareness, a striving towards structure" or something "hard and dry" (Hulme 1924:96,243), "cleaned up" and "reshaped by an aggressively phallic artistic consciousness" (Britzolakis 2002:68). High cultural writing is hence seen as a masculine reprieve of the feminine contamination or excess of the prostituted physical and scatological archival 'body' or its low cultural elements. It is worth adding, here, that although the work was financially lucrative, Plath similarly viewed her magazine ('women's slicks') stories as "sordid money-makers" (1992:112), as they "prostitute talent in the name of false, conventional values" (Britzolakis 2002:16). Plath herself used the 'magazine name' 'Sylvan Hughes', a sexual pun intended to keep her 'high', 'masculine' art "intact" (2000b:215).

To return to "Fever 103°", although sexual intercourse triggers the speaker's feelings of dirtiness aligned with the cultural stigma of an uninhibited female sexuality, it also functions as a pathway to sexual self-control – albeit a control endorsed by a male gaze. With her commodified "gold beaten skin", the speaker is cinematically incarnated and rises to a

celestial realm as "a pure acetylene / Virgin / Attended by roses". This revelation of pure kitsch positions female authorship on the high/mass culture border and suggests how neither poet nor speaker can fully withdraw into an untainted, uncontaminated aesthetic space (Britzolakis 2002). Likewise, in "Lady Lazarus", to write sensational "true confessions 'from the heart'" is to prostitute oneself or "become a gross body addicted to the fleshly pleasures" of a feminised popular culture (Britzolakis 2002:148). Repeatedly, then, in the poems from *Ariel*, a reader is confronted by Plath's ambivalent representations of femaleness in relation to commodification, confession and sexuality.

Lant is of the opinion that although the reader of "Fever 103°" expects a new, purified self to emerge and transcend earthly restrictions, "nothing is left to make the ascension" (1993:642), as, along with the selves that have been burned or "dissolv[ed]" away, the potentially purified body has been subjected to the same eradication. Hence, the fullness of the female body signals a loss of creative potency where, for Plath, a masculine gender identity and the male gaze as a metonym for masculine desire signal the opposite. This non-existence of the 'bared' self is, however, more usefully viewed as a trope for Plath's inability to pin-point a unified self if one considers the magician-like disappearing acts implied in the poem: "Love, love, the low smokes roll / From me like Isadora's scarves", "My selves dissolving". Here, too, the image is of the speaker smoking a cigarette – a phallic object long associated with so-called female promiscuity as at once alluring and transgressive, and thought to activate "the powerful erotic sensitivity of the oral zone" along with the imaginative (Rutherford 2007:76).

In many of the *Ariel* poems, Plath's use of mouth imagery links the appetite and tasting both with the taboo of oral sex and of speaking out, which involves the woman poet's mouthing of controversial sexual topics via the written word. Related to this vocalisation (which will be discussed in the next chapter), "associations of wounding and orality" (Britzolakis 2002:95) rear themselves in Plath's imaginative performances of the vampire. These enactments afford Plath the opportunity to gain a semblance of sexual control to appease her guilt that she is, according to patriarchal paradigms, a whore. In recent years, popular culture has seen a resurgence of the Gothic vampire – take, for example, the films of *The Twilight Saga* and the television programme *True Blood*. The gender-bending, rapacious female sexualities in these visual texts and their Gothic properties are pre-empted and parodied by Plath in response to her own cultural context. Notably, the vamp is propitiously associated with an autonomous femininity, gender ambiguity, and homoerotic gratification and, as such, demonstrates how women's visual pleasure or the female spectator's gaze is not

negotiated exclusively through the reifying eyes of men. Concurrent with her vampiric identities in "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", Plath's persona in "Ariel", for example, refers to "eye / Berries" that "cast dark / Hooks– // Black sweet blood mouthfuls". Here, she offers a provocatively surreal inversion of mouth and vagina, the mouth portrayed as a receptacle for menstrual blood.

Many of the female personae in *Ariel* are the ambiguous receivers *cum* victims of oral sex in the guise of women's vampirism, which once again underscores Bellour's (1979) theory of a sadistic/masochistic tension, although Plath conceptualises this traditionally male/female relationship in female/female terms. In "Lesbos", for instance, the line "Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat" implies oral sex and a nagging diminution or draining of the speaker's sanctioned domestic *status quo* by her parasitic, erotically frustrating alternative self. In "Poppies in July", the comparison of the poppies to "A mouth just bloodied" is redolent of a close-up of sexually alluring, masking red lipstick and, by extension, the mouth of a vampire who has bitten into flesh and drunk the blood of the now dead victim. Together with this image, the speaker's reference to the poppies as revealing "bloody skirts" presents the woman addressee as a low-class vamp – a female archetype who poses a 'biting' threat to Plath as another woman and the 'victimised' Ted Hughes, if one concurs with the argument that the poem is about Plath's seductive nemesis, Assia Wevill (Wagner 2000).

It is possible that Plath's use of vampiric imagery in the portrayal of her female personae could well be an implied critique not only of a self-reflexive masochistic femininity which "elides the insignia of female sexuality with a wound located within subjectivity", (what Plath calls "the stigma of selfhood" [1962:1]), but also of men's accusation in the 1950s that women were "sex parasites". K. A. Cuordileone, for instance, refers to "weak men and helpless boys" who were "victimized by parasitic women" (2000:523). In these terms, women exchange places with men and thereby invert the conventional male/female and subject/object binaries. Moreover, this mocking emasculation of men via allusions to women's vampirism underscores how Plath turns the blatant mouth imagery associated with the male gaze back on itself to parody men, their salacious mouths agape, tongues licking, and undermine "a culture of consumption in which images of women circulate as commodities" (Britzolakis 2002:135). That said, while Plath's ostensibly pornographic focus on women's overtly sexual mouth (itself a metaphor for genitalia) seems to insinuate an appropriation of the male gaze, she uses men's focus on women's objectified sexuality against them and, masochistically, against herself and other women. The latter is particularly important if one considers the image of the female body and the Plath archive or body-in-

bits-and-pieces as entities effectively eaten by the eye/I of a feminised mass culture and thereby rendered susceptible to a fragmentation of identity and what Helle refers to as "real and phantasmagoric identifications" (2007:7).

In some ways too, Plath's *Ariel* poems evince a fantastical female imaginary based on projected identifications beyond the conventionally female. Several of the poems can be read as proposing a lesbian experimentalism, for instance, which may speak to Plath's actual longings or perhaps to her wish, as a writer, to explore subject positions beyond the heteronormative. Even here, in turning to representations of lesbian identity, Plath is likely to have found herself challenged. It has been argued that the majority of mainstream images of lesbians have been "authored by men and structured by the perspectives of the male gaze" (McNair 2002:142) for men's sexual gratification, with the result that pleasures of female spectatorship have been overlooked. All too often, lesbians "are cartoons, and their world is presented as loathsome, intolerably isolated", "foul and self-denying" (McNair 2002:134). Plath's representation of marginalised lesbian women highlights her commitment to the exposure, de-stigmatisation and mainstreaming of publicly 'shameful' sexualities from the complex vantage point of a woman poet.

In "Ariel", for instance, Plath proposes that lesbians are capable of engaging with the creation of their own self-definition and self-assertiveness which operates from beyond the bias of a male gaze. As McNair (2002) indicates, a number of gay icons, Andy Warhol among them, have similarly used their art to challenge gender norms through a rejection of the conventional, heterosexual gaze over the subject. In "Ariel", Plath as poet, speaker, voyeur – the boundaries are never clear – presents two lesbian women enacting sexual intercourse in the small discursive space of the poem, a space which does not reinforce the dominant, erroneous link between homosexuality and perversion, but presents lesbianism as an affirmative sexual orientation and euphoric union between women's bodies: "How one we grow". This unification engenders an ambiguous physical and spiritual birth through the act of sex. Plath's description of the speaker's lover as "God's lioness" implies the predatory maternal fertility of the speaker's feminist journey "Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning", that is, into the birth of a new self that emancipates her from the stasis and draining impediments of her previous uncreative existence. Here, both 'motherhood' and the procreative female body's potential represent what Diane Middlebrook (2003) describes as a catalyst for Plath's poetic creativity.

Coincidentally, "Ariel" was written on Plath's birthday and is replete with references to women's genitalia and sexual fluids: "furrow", "red // Eye" and "wall" (vagina); "neck"

(cervix); "Foam to wheat" (orgasmic fluid); "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" (menstrual blood). Mary Douglas argues that the body is "a model which can stand for any bonded system" and its "margins are dangerous" to the extent that "spittle, blood, milk, urine, feces, or tears simply by issuing forth have traversed the boundaries of the body" (1969:145). These bodily products do not respect borders, positions or rules, and they disturb the patriarchal notion of a unified identity and draw further connotations of the waste associated with the 'female' Plath archive as a repository of 'bits and pieces' of inconclusive Plath material (Shulkes 2005). In this manner, Plath's images of blood and vaginal discharge show how the challenging of gender norms and physiological boundaries – the 'public' unmasking of 'private' femininity – is a provocative yet necessary action.

The fluids that are expelled from the woman's body are, to use Julia Kristeva's (1982) term, abject, and hence removed from a male gaze which focuses on those external parts of the woman's body deemed explicitly sexual, aesthetic, and non-disagreeable. Britzolakis similarly maintains that Plath's use of the trope of femininity as excess intentionally "violates both [the] aesthetic and ideological closure" of the "'perfect' body of woman-as-artefact" (2002:167). In this regard, Plath forces into public view an unsettling version of the female gaze by de-eroticising the conventionally erotic female body and, in doing so, also subverting its male equivalent. (Here, the interested reader is referred to Plath's graphic accounts of vomiting and sinusitis in the *Journals*.) Furthermore, it is worth noting that in "Ariel", in contrast with "Fever 103°", it is writing – the "I / Am" or 'iamb' of the poetic line – that deliberately refuses to keep the "forces of bodily abjection at bay" (Britzolakis 2002:16). Again, a reader is directed to Plath's transgressive treatment not only of subject matter, but of form.

In the poem, the two women's sexual intercourse bears none of the constriction which defines heterosexual unions in that it is un-plagued by the threat of pregnancy – much like the 'unreal' sex acts in male-authored pornographic films: "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas. / The child's cry // Melts in the wall". The androgynous poet projects herself into the male-dominated position behind the pornographic camera position and, in doing so, challenges the assumption that the mechanics of the sex act take centre stage for the erotic benefit of the voyeuristic male eye/I. The speaker's flight as "the arrow, // The dew that flies" mirrors the 'money-shot' common in pornographic films, where the man's ejaculation is exaggeratedly made visible to his sexual object, as if cum were the very elixir of Life and indeed Creation. Here, in conjunction with the image of semen in "Gigolo", it is evident that the sexual fluids secreted by men, unlike those by women, are celebrated 'publicly' by the

male gaze that Plath temporarily adopts. In addition, the flying "arrow" evokes an equestrian image of the speaker riding a horse – another symbol of male sexual power and a reference to a sexual position assumed by a heterosexual couple during intercourse. Plath utilises and subverts the power associated with this image through her depiction of an unconventional, 'deviant' or 'illicit' sexual act between two women who perform in the public domain of literature a secret pleasure of female life.

Also noteworthy is that the lesbian union is a trope for the *woman* poet's *female* inspiration. This is to say that the other female persona represents, for Plath, a "muse imagined in one's own likeness, with whom one can fornicate with violence and laughter". A poetry of wholeness and joy is hence regarded as an "embracing of one's sexuality" in juxtaposition to "the poetry of the 'age of anxiety'" (Ostriker 1982:76). As an active, aggressive woman, the speaker in "Ariel" overturns preconceptions that the strong female is (self-)deceptive or falsely powerful and the virtuous female, particularly the muse, is gently passive (Ostriker 1982). Moreover, there exists a central asymmetry in the relationship between the two women, as their emotional closeness "is derived from acknowledged likeness, not from the patriarchal relationship of dominance and submission" (Ostriker 1982:83).

As both the sexual instigator or driving "arrow" (sperm) and the receiving cauldron or "Eye" (fertilised egg), Plath's speaker enacts a man's and a woman's sexual and gender roles in a keen demonstration of androgyny which is suggestive of a type of "double *exposure*" (my italics) (Helle 2007:189). Evidently, her struggle with a performative gender identity is manifest in the speaker's destruction of some of the female in her 'self' ("The child's cry // Melts in the wall") in order to allow for the phallic male power to emerge. Given the suicidal or masochistic, consuming nature of the fertilisation depicted, the creatrix also playing the role of the destroyer (Ostriker 1982), Plath is suggesting that the vagina of sex and childbirth is also a death cavity or grave in which male virility can be drained and entombed.

Despite the fact that the speaker's new 'self' in "Ariel" is one that has been re-defined and violently re-born independent of any reactive, constricting relationships with men, her appropriation of a naked male power transforms or reshapes the prevalent image of naked women in subordinate positions whose role is to satisfy men sexually. It is obvious that while Plath endeavours to be feminine, she also aspires to possess a "sinuous muscularity and masculinity" (Lant 1993:643) and thereby to purify her vulnerable female self in the "cauldron of morning". Such power is the antithesis of Plath's actual command performances of highly stylised femininities, such as those of the glamour girl and housewife.

As Butler (1999) might aver, "Ariel" depicts Plath's difficult attempt to reconfigure the patriarchal gaze through a destabilisation of stereotypical gender roles and conventional heterosexuality. Plath's female gaze in the poem connotes a lesbian perspective that subscribes to Judith Mayne's 'both/and' identification: the speaker is both complicit with and resistant to performative phallocentric norms, particularly the male/female hierarchy. The contradiction denoted by lesbian representation presents a lure and a threat, for both patriarchal culture and feminism alike, and "challenges a model of signification in which masculinity and activity, femininity and passivity, are always symmetrically balanced" (1990:125). "Ariel" is a significant example of the sites of dissonance that inflect female looking. If, as Suzanne Moore (1988) speculates, the female gaze shelters under gay male looking, then what of the reverse? Could the male gaze then be regarded as lesbian looking? Moreover, if female and gay male gazing are "in contradistinction to 'real male' gazing", then could one argue that male and lesbian gazing are in contradistinction to 'real female' gazing – hence implying a non-sexualised looking between women? (Mackinnon 1999:27). I cannot hope to answer such questions, but my treatment of Plath's poetry does attempt to bring a reader into a different viewing relationship with this poet's work, even if we are no closer to unlocking the mystery of the spectator/spectacle relationship when a female occupies both roles.

Akin to the contemporary striptease culture, the erotic and pornographic female personae in the *Ariel* poems and others selected expose that which has been relegated to the domestic sphere by 1950s patriarchy and therefore variously dissolve and threaten the boundary between the private and the public. Plath's poetry hence points to an unmasking (achieved or otherwise) of the erotically and pornographically 'subversive', which was at odds with the roles of marriage and motherhood. That said, while the cinetextual constructions in her poetry signal Plath's re-inscription of culture in terms of her own subversive meanings (Helle 2007), they are also, however, restored by a gendered culture in which woman is the "bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey 1989:15). This is particularly relevant with regard to Plath's troublesome position as "a creative woman in a gender-polarised culture" (Ostriker 1987:60), as her identity is caught between her ambition to be the professional equivalent of her male counterparts and her endeavour to gain the approval of male dominated publishing houses and academic corridors in order to be authenticated as a professional writer. Plath variously chafes against femaleness and/or seeks to turn the conventions to her own gain. In other words, she both underpins and critiques 1950s western gender norms or stereotypical representations of women denoted by the persistent gaze logic

of subject/object, male/female, active/passive and, by extension, heterosexual/homosexual. In effect, Plath is "at the center of the tension between the rebellion and recovery of traditional gender roles" (Helal 2004:78). In Mulvey's terms, Plath is ultimately "unable to find a 'femininity' in which she and the male world can meet" (1989:36), and her own re-looking at the conventions of *to-be-looked-at-ness* remains caught in a disabling 'no-man's land'.

In spite of this irreducible tension, Plath's poetic personae emphasise for readers a fragmented take on feminist orthodoxy, foregrounding an assimilated multiplicity of female subject positions; they present a reader with alternative and diverse readings and representations of femininity from the interrogatory perspective of the multiple female gaze. As Janet Lee expresses it, contrary to a monolithic masculinised stare, a "unified subject position was never constitutive of the feminist gaze" (1988:167), and Plath's presentation of women's 'looking' as disorientating rather than easily comprehensible directs us to the enigma or unrepresentability of femininity, and gives her lyric poetry a perversely alluring density that it would not have were it a simple revelation of self (Lant 1993).

CHAPTER THREE: BODY, VOICE AND VENTRILOQUISM

> The "personal" is already a plural condition. Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body – in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal. (Hejinian 1991:170)

As *Ariel* permits, Plath's multiple 'I' takes up lodging in the bodies of various personae. By inference, this disembodiment entails her entering the mouths of speakers who perform the roles of ventriloquists' puppets. Plath's poetic strategy additionally positions her as a puppeteer and/or ventriloquist whose versatile voice(s) and manipulative tactics bring her *dramatis personae* to life in a convincing manner. In such terms, then, the reader is involved not only in looking or the 'visual', but also in listening or the 'aural'. The latter draws attention to the aberrations of the ventriloquial voice as a stylistic signature and tool for the negotiation of 'identity' from the woman poet's perspective.

According to art theorist David Goldblatt, "speaking in the voice of another is a topic that has generated a good deal of literature in recent years, especially in the context of feminism" (1993:397). It has been recognised, for instance, that women poets have been obliged to "sound largely through the manipulation of pre-existing verbal codes and forms that put them in dialogue" with miscellaneous popular discourses that have often been considered *beyond* the boundaries of the properly poetic – conversation, cartoons, and magazines, as well as burlesque theatre, which is associated with voice-throwing illusions (Chapman 2005:1). Given that 'ventriloquism' in its etymology means 'belly speech' or 'speaking through the belly', I am interested in exploring forms of oral-aural embodiedness in relation to male/female tensions and expression/silence in *Ariel*. This will involve my considering not only the fairly standard idea of the body-as-voice/d, but the voice-as-body. The latter is a perhaps unusual idea. It is widely assumed that a poet 'has a voice', and that this voice is part of what makes the writing distinctive. C. B. Davis, further, refers to writing as a "medium" (2003:50) for recording the human voice, which evinces the possibility of seeing the written word as an imitation of speech, while Mary Strine calls poetry "a speech genre" (1989:28). Fair enough. More even than this, however, I intend through the idea of voice-as-body to direct our attention to some of the interesting voice-overings that occur in Plath's poetry amongst speech, writing and body (or mouth, ears, mind, hands, heart, belly ...). In particular, I wish to illustrate the ability of poetic voice to articulate in embodied form Plath's volatile, multiple experiential reality in ways that are not necessarily constant or coherent, and almost certainly not directly spoken.

Further, I associate the idea of voice-as-body with the curious power of this writer to speak beyond the grave in a printed version of voice which is so extraordinarily singular (for a woman poet?), but which is yet mistaken by many critics for the single-sounding voice of 'the confessional, suicidal female writer'. In this chapter, then, I will up the volume somewhat on Lant's interesting assertion that "Plath did, indeed, write her body" (1993:666) through the especial power of voice – raised and thrown, outspoken and artfully 'vented'. In this regard, as I will show, speech in *Ariel* – a written volume which also entails *spoken* volume and *spatial* volume, an echo chamber and a sounding board – amplifies the tensions, discontinuities and ambiguities of language as they bear on the female form. As Paul Mitchell says of the early Plath poems (an opinion I extrapolate to *Ariel*):

> the tension between the imposition of the signifier and language's inconsistencies (its gaps, ambiguity, and silence) animates these texts to create poetry that is both disturbing and affecting. In consequence, the reader must participate in the dissolution and reconstitution of speaking/reading identity through these poems' problematic (a)signification. (2005:38)

The mystifying art of seeming to speak where one is not or "throwing one's voice into another person or puppet or other mute, inanimate object" (Pierson 2010) is clouded by much ambiguity. For this reason, like Goldblatt (1993), I am interested in the 'ventriloquial' as a loose interpretative paradigm without conceptualising this 'body swapping' subterfuge in terms of a facile puppet/puppeteer duplicity. Such a model, I believe, would fail to take cognizance of Plath's active examination of female identity comprising "mobile congeries of selves" (Lim 1997:9). Neither do I intend to make sweeping claims for the puppet personae in *Ariel* as indicative of authenticity[11] in terms of Plath's identity, nor do I wish to align these manipulated figures directly with the ventriloquist's repressed selves[12]. In effect, then, I am not insisting that Plath 'in' her poems is always either the masterful puppeteer or else the manipulated puppet; instead, I will consider how she moves between both roles in order to engage with the voicings and silences associated with femaleness, and with writing.

The dummy frequently articulates "relatively outrageous, improper content", operating "on the periphery of good taste" by voicing taboo, or the "otherwise unspeakable" (Goldblatt 1993:392). As an effect of the form's prominence in vaudeville and 'fairground' entertainment, ventriloquists often inclined towards comedy and satire (Goldblatt 1993); the risqué humour which characterised the thrown voice, or instances of biting social critique, could be attributed not to the ventriloquist proper, but to the renegade 'other'.

In the light of these claims, I hope, firstly, to undermine the troubling emphasis on unmediated confession which has preoccupied many critics dealing with Plath's work (Alvarez and Yezzi in Bryant 2002, for example). To realise this end, I will use Britzolakis' (2002) theory of the theatre of mourning so as to illustrate how the heightened catachresis of Plath's 'IMAX' language (note the distinctive timbre of many female celebrities' voices) or vocal body shows that she is keenly aware of the 'act' of speaking, which in turn makes her especially conscious of the workings of language and/or voice aligned with liminality (Helle 2005). Sarah Hannah's comment on *Ariel* is interesting in this regard, for she reminds us that the "later poems have received far more attention for *what* they are saying than for *how* they are saying it" (my italics) (2003:232-33). Secondly, I am concerned with the motif of manipulation fundamental to the puppet/puppeteer interplay, for Plath is not only herself manipulated – via the discourses of gender, domesticity, and literary critical expectation – but also manipulates a body of ideas or language, as do her personae who regularly control the poetic action even as they are themselves controlled *by* it.

Lastly, this chapter will investigate the acoustics of utterance in *Ariel*, extending Kate Moses' (2007) work on the 'Oral Archive' of Plath's late, 'restored' voice recordings. Plath herself recognised the importance of oral transmission, the propinquity between poetic composition and the performed word, in the cultural reception of the *Ariel* poems: they are written for the ear, not the eye: they are pieces written out loud (see Wagner 1988). My study is premised on the paradox at the heart of ventriloquism; that is, the 'throwing' of the voice while simultaneously speaking inwardly (Davis 2003). The *dis*embodied voice is therefore very much *em*bodied as well. In this regard, alongside references to supposedly naturalised projective vocal technologies such as the radio and telephone, I will discuss the 'thrown voice' in comparison with gagged speech. Caitriona O'Reilly observes that the "consciousness of *Ariel* has many different masks and positions; part of the excitement of the volume comes from the restless dynamism of a voice that repeatedly insists on *escaping* from deadening enclosures" (my italics) (2003:360). There are moments when 'the female' is subvocal in *Ariel* rather than expressly articulated and, I should also emphasise, Plath's orality is not synonymous with conventional eloquence. She intentionally breaks the genteel illusions of female behaviour appropriate to polite society as well as conventions of flowing poetic line by stuttering, halting, and raging. In exploring this expressive deviation, I hope to allow new power to that part of Plath which she sometime shrank from as repulsive. As Liz Yorke describes it, expanding on Plath's own take in the *Unabridged Journals*, this is a "disruptive and 'uncomfortable ugly and hairy' voice" (1991:49). (Poet Adrienne Rich, for

instance, has acknowledged finding in Plath's unusual female voice the space of an outrageous freedom which to some degree enabled her own radical feminist writing.)

The juxtaposition between shocking impoliteness and sustained pretence is rooted in the irony of ventriloquism itself, a performance which, unlike puppetry in its traditional guise, is premised on the deliberate fostering of the illusion that the voice emanates from another person or object. As Goldblatt remarks, the dummy is "made to appear" to speak and the convention lets the audience in on the trick: "There is, in ventriloquism, illusion without deception" (1993:391). The result is an insistence that readers acknowledge their complicity in the sociocultural constraints or practices which Plath critiques.

Brad Epps makes the trite assumption that ventriloquism "requires the dumb compliance, the submissive insignificance, of ... other bodies. It is, hence, an act of speech that entails a violent silence on the part of another" (1992:292). I disagree. Different forms of agency, different types of authority and subjugation, may be associated with various instances of ventriloquism. The 'thrown voice' may entail a passive yielding to authority, an ostensible giving up of one's own agency in the adopting of a voice, yet, as Goldblatt implies, the credibility of the situation and the projected sound depend on a relational interplay of voices and agencies, not on the setting up of easy distinctions between an active 'vent' and a passive 'doll'. He argues that it is possible for the "inanimate dummy" to appear vibrant, "dominant and active and the creator passive and submissive" (1992:390). An apparent effacement of self therefore can be understood not inevitably as silencing, but as a tactic through which to cause a dominant voice *to speak differently* (Chapman 2005). An example of this lies in Plath's complex ventriloquial position as a woman poet.

In part, Plath as a woman poet adept in speaking through personae challenges the gender stereotype of the ventriloquist as male and, in doing so, she underscores her androgyny as a poet. However, this absorption of the masculine aspect of ventriloquism also speaks to Plath's early appropriation of the literary techniques and styles of writers who were, chiefly, male. Dubbed "the anxiety of influence", this form of ventriloquism – the mouthing of other poets – was rooted in Plath's belief that she had to conform to traditional models in order to achieve literary prominence. John Donne, William Butler Yeats, Theodore Roethke ... these are among the notable male poets whose technique and manner she emulated in her ambition for success (Wagner 1988). Indeed, Roy Fuller describes Plath's appropriative poetic voice as "rather ventriloquial" (1961:69), implying that as a young and female poet she was positioned as the 'dummy' against the 'master' of the male poetic tradition.

As I maintained in chapter two, Plath envisages her creativity in aggressive masculine terms, yet also "attempts to write a poetry beyond the male literary tradition" (Childs 1999:161). The "divided nature" of Plath's voicing hence owes less to the female hysteric or psychological malady than to a socially produced conflict over the right voice, and to make art of this voicing; there is a tussle between "the masculine creator" who battles "with the feminine subject through whom she speaks her poetry" (Lant 1993:648). Erving Goffman goes even further, questioning the assumption that any individual, never mind the specifically artful identities which a poet may affect, should be assumed, ordinarily, to speak "in his 'own' character" (1974:512). For women, in particular, there have been "political and poetic impossibilities" for this form of supposedly authentic voicing, and they have "struggled to speak the self through and within the literary forms and traditions established by men" (Chapman 2005:1).

The woman poet is variously constrained and enabled by the voices of poetic authority. In other words, as Jane Dowson argues (n. d.), while patriarchy demands of women writers a form of ventriloquism, this tutelary obeisance can become an enabling textual-cultural strategy, a means through which to articulate what might otherwise be silenced or unvoiced. As I hope to illustrate, Plath's mediation of her voice through literary effects long associated with a male canon is not imitation but a deliberate aesthetic decision which re-mobilises and hence alters the source text, rather than merely 'echoing' it. Clearly, in reclaiming the value of Plath's poetry for a contemporary generation I am eager to refute the assumption that male literary ventriloquists might exert influence via voice while women who speak in multiple voices are failed vocal illusionists with no sway (Davis 2003)[13]. A case in point is the strikingly unusual voicing to be found in Plath's elegies, which I discuss later in this chapter.

In the *Journals*, Plath asks: "What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough" (2000a:315). The implication here is that there is no clearly intentioned speaking of Plath's 'voice' in her writing. She might hear herself more 'like' Virginia Woolf than 'like' Edna St Vincent Millay, for example, but she understands that this form of female utterance, for society and poetic tradition, 'alas', is not necessarily to like. (Notice how sly slips amongst confession, mimicry and posturing play are wonderfully carried by the self-dramatising tone.) Even Plath does not necessarily like what she hears in her voice. If she needs a Woolfish tone, so too does she intuit the need to temper the feminised stream of consciousness associated with such a tone, and so she claims toughness, mutes a lyrical vocality in favour of harsher, blunter tones. Clearly, Plath's 'voice' enjoys no direct line of influence; it is not to

be understood as ventriloquised through this writer or that, whether male or female. Instead, there are deflections, tangents, obstacles and personae which attest to the problematics of utterance for the woman poet whose personal ambitions as a writer cannot be separated from both male and female literary influences and from the sociocultural milieu of life in 1950s and early 1960s America and England. Even more interestingly, as Plath says, "It is sad to be able only to mouth other poets. I want someone to mouth me" (2000a:92). How mixed the emotions here. The longing for seductive fame is voiced as an erotic charge, almost a longed-for sexual union, and at the same time the phrasing hints at perceived – *felt* – disappointments and failures.

Any 'multivocality' in *Ariel* is thus not an easy, unproblematic 'throwing of the voice', but a struggle amongst voices which are associated with the sociocultural strains of heteroglossia and dialogism. In her discussion of Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, for instance, Strine explains how 'voice', for Bakhtin, is understood as heteroglossia. This entails both "the acoustical aspects of speech" (for instance, range, timbre, pitch) *and* the crucial, co-extensive aspect of "worldview" that shapes voice and individuality and the utterance through which one relates to other voices in social situations (1989:25). That is, heteroglossia comprises a "multiplicity of social voices" which mediate gender, race and class (Bakhtin 1981:263). Notable in this regard is Dickie's (1982) reminder that Plath's poems should be read as artistic renditions of social observation or social contextualising. Consider Knickerbocker's argument for Plath as a poet insistently of the world rather than merely of an angstful, tortured self. He examines her relation to nature, environment and nuclear threat, for example, and acknowledges that it is "her combining and negotiating of modern and romantic impulses, often in the same poem" (2009:5), that make her poetry distinctive. Margaret L. Shook, too, claims that *Ariel* evinces Plath's ventriloquism of 1950s women's shared experience "re-lived in the imagination" (1988:115). A poet's 'voice', in other words, is not to be understood as merely 'her own'. And yet many of the preoccupations and conflicts in Plath's poems *are* uniquely her own, whether we take this to mean that they derive from her lived experience, or that they are creative expressions which have been shaped by her personal imagination. Throughout, then, I have to accommodate 'ventriloquism' as a tricky form of voicing in relation to the *Ariel* poems. There are elements of 'self'-ventriloquial expression, as well as voices which echo Plath's 'anxiety of influence'. Additionally, I have to acknowledge that the words which comprise the poems have been un-mouthed in the sense that if they seemingly emanate from the speakers or personae, the actual text or the originating mouth (and mind) is Plath's. Tellingly, it is difficult to separate them, reinforcing

my claim that far from being able to apply the metaphor of ventriloquism as a simple channelling of voice from active vent to inert puppet, the trope needs to be flexibly understood in order to accommodate the complex soundings and silences of Plath's poetry.

My project, drawing on the current resurgence of Plath scholarship in which a new breed of scholars talks back to the insistent, narrow voice of traditional Plath research (which almost treats Plath's poems as a ventriloquist's dummy which is made to speak a preferred interpretation, with the criticism eventually reaching a vocal impasse that fixates on the dead poet), is interested in multivocality in the poems themselves and I extend this, too, towards a willingness to hear discord and contradiction in Plath's work. This is clearly a very different critical method than the one which assumes the confessionalism of Plath's poems. I recognise that "Plath learned to write under the sign of a double imperative: you must express yourself; you must master formulas to do so" (Hammer 2001:83), and thus appreciate that 'confessional' is no mere outpouring or authenticity, but a convoluted ventriloquising of self and culture. When I read Plath's poems, I am struck by a paradox: on the one hand, the shifting fluidity or transformative quality of the dynamic ventriloquial voice offers numerous strengths and multivocal[14] articulations; and yet on the other, there is also a sense in which Plath treats mobile subject positions and voicings as *problematic*, as a fracturing constraint associated especially with split female subjectivity and the difficulties of expression for the woman poet. While these qualities do not make for easy reading or, for that matter, *listening*, along with contemporary Plath scholars I am interested in working with this concatenation rather than reinforcing some shallow univocality in the *Ariel* poems. Like the erotic and pornographic elements discussed in the previous chapter, ventriloquism and its counterpart, puppetry, should not be thought of as stigma, but as experimental challenge and possibility, the poet attempting to speak self, society and otherwise.

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In his discussion of *Ariel*, Robert Von Hallberg refers to Plath's "stunningly performative poetic" rooted in her "construction of a voice" (1985:68). While the monologism of this statement fails to take account of the multiple, mutable voices present in the collection, Von Hallberg is astute in his deduction that 'voice' in *Ariel* is an aesthetically *constructed* entity. Debra Shulkes (2005), similarly, argues that more attention needs to be paid to the musical or percussive effects of Plath's poetry, that is, phonemic structure or vocalism over and above emotive function. Critics have certainly played an integral role in manipulating Plath given

their insistence on biographical readings of her work and on her supposed 'confessionalism' as a 'crazy girl poet' (Knickerbocker 2009). It therefore needs to be understood that the *Ariel* poems do not exactly 'speak for themselves', but speak through the ventriloquising interventions of critics who project voices in particular ways or directions. With such manoeuvring in mind, despite claims (Butscher and Fromm in Gill 2006) that her poetry is formless and merely solipsistic, Plath's own comments offer a powerful antithetical reading:

> [M]y poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart ... I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experience, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured ... and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. (Orr 1966:169-70)

The immediate and the manipulated. The powerful emotion and the calculating creative art. Evidently, "the connections between a writer's life and her work are numerous, indirect, and mysterious" (O'Reilly 2003:361). Plath fuses psychobiography with craft, constructs rather than exclusively confesses secret or taboo aspects of 'self'. Helle and Tracy Brain concur that a large part of Plath's capacity to represent multiple identities is her awareness of "disappearing into the scene and act of creation" which, conversely, renders her more aware that the self she is constructing is an artifice or type of performative speech 'act' (Helle 2005:638). Quoting Steven K. Hoffman, Lant likewise maintains that *all* "poetic voice is, in fact, 'a carefully constructed aesthetic entity'" (1993:622). Although referring to the consumer-commodity relationship, Bryant likewise represents the voice in each *Ariel* poem as a "high flying speaker" who "occupies a position somewhere between compulsion and choice" (1999:18). In other words, the female's *compulsion* of housewifery and her *choice* to use a particular domestic product raises the ambiguous question of agency central to Plath's poetry and the motif of ventriloquism: the *Ariel* verse blends *compulsive* confession with *chosen* language and form.

Given that the poems are mediated or structured, they cannot be classified as confessional *per se*, for as Robert Phillips indicates, true confessional poetry could be regarded as a strategy of some inflated and unmediated outpouring of emotion from the "loose mouth of the I-speaker[s]" (Shulkes 2005:157); confessional poetry "dispenses with a symbol or formula for an emotion and gives the naked emotion direct, personally rather than impersonally" (1973:8). As my comments thus far will attest, I am not convinced. I find, in comparison, repeated evidence of a complex 'ventriloquial voicing' in the *Ariel* poems, many

of which offer "the impression of conversation", since the ventriloquist "must not simply speak in another voice, she must efface herself as speaker while simultaneously promoting herself as listener" (Goldblatt 1993:391). This is hardly the mode of authentic confession – whatever that might be!

Britzolakis, who treats Plath's poems as performative art, terms the premise of mediated confessionalism a 'doubled discourse' which "withholds from both poet and reader any secure identification" (2006:59). Through an unstable and theatricalised irony, the *Ariel* poems comprise a genre of hyperbolic performance or a theatre of subjectivity in that they "enact a paradoxical project of staged self-exposure" which cannot simply be confined to a biographical narrative (Britzolakis 2002:121). In comparison with unmediated expression, Plath employs a variety of vocal impersonations which are exaggerated or stylised. These include any number of language registers and discourses, among them: literary language, popular music, film references, nursery rhymes, historical fact and unattributed 'quotation'. All of these are interesting forms of ventriloquial citation. Britzolakis also points out that Plath's construction of the speaking subject "displaces familiar distinctions between poet and persona, voice and rhetoric, sincerity and performance, which demarcate an implied putative authorial consciousness from the 'speaker' of the poem" (2002:6). The ontological boundary between fiction and autobiography, construction and emotion, is therefore an unstable one, with the unity and identifiability of the speaking 'I' called into question.

This ambiguity is played out in the subject/object roles in which Plath positions the poet and her speaker as puppet/puppeteer and/or ventriloquist/ventriloquised. These are identities premised on the idea of substitute bodies and vocal projections of the woman poet's role-playing 'self'. Plath's speakers frequently act as the mouthpieces of so-called controversial, concealed female identities and, in doing so, paradoxically foreground her negativity and self-reflexivity as subject (Shulkes 2005 and Jones n. d.). The actor/observer dichotomy implied here incorporates manipulations of point of view (Dickie 1982) or a continual shuffling and integrating of various roles in the subject position and, in this manner, points to the elusiveness of the unified identity on which assumptions of confessional poetry are so often based. This displacement of voice and authority undermines the 'Plath persona' – the "confessional", "psychiatric" case (Knickerbocker 2009:2) to which critics have given a great deal of cultural circulation.

In order to further my discussion, I will now turn my attention to the motif of puppetry as a specific figuring of the ventriloquial manipulation which defines the puppet/puppeteer relationship. In particular, I will draw analogies between forms of voicing

in Plath's poetry and orality and/or sound associated with consumer technologies. Roland Marchand discusses post-war culture's re-personalisation of life through the utilisation of corporate personae in advertisements to make "inanimate things come alive" (1985:358). This re-personalisation refers not only to Bryant's conception of the 1950s housewife-magician as the companion of an array of odd beings in the form of supernatural figures (genies and sprites, for example) from print and television advertisements for domestic products, but also to the eccentric, (in)animate puppets in *Ariel* who 'publicly' vocalise 'private' emotions. Plath's vivification and voicing of inanimate objects are processes of a staged masking which, in Britzolakis' (2002) terms, presents the Gothic drama of the haunting of the subject and grounds poetic performance in metaphoric identification itself. As close relations of the mask, puppets enable Plath to hide behind other identities in a complex layering of identity. This enables her to evade constraints of the 1950s sociocultural context: motherhood and housewifery, for instance. A layered identity also permits Plath to mediate the manipulated/manipulator dichotomy central to puppetry.

In "Lesbos", for example, Plath subverts the notion that the puppet is a projection of an innocent world in which childhood fantasies come true, as this world possesses a nightmarish quality: the speaker's baby is a "little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear– / Why she is schizophrenic, / Her face red and white, a panic". As an embodiment of the speaker herself, the clown-faced, uncontrollable child or marionette symbolises the shadow side of 1950s motherhood and the housewife figure's position on the precipice of insurgency. Plath's speaker is hence vertiginously "unstrung", threatening received norms of domestic conformity and the ideal of doting motherhood. This puppet/human interaction is developed in a number of other Plath poems in which the puppet, in ways analogous to that of clothing in chapter four, provides the fantastical embodiment of a particular person(a), thus signalling an attrition of the reality principle. In other words, the puppet does not conform to actual human proportions, but is frequently and fantastically much larger or smaller than human size.

It seems that to various 'characters' in her life and herself, Plath attributes an IMAX 'largeness of life' and grandeur akin to the performative identities of puppet and puppeteer. This 'Alice in Wonderland' ability to distort proportions is perhaps most evident in Plath's relationship with two significant male figures – her husband, Ted Hughes, and her father, Otto Plath. (While I have tended to avoid focussing on 'the poet's life', a little biographical detail is in order here.) In Sylvia Plath's eyes, she and Hughes made love "like giants" (Hayman 1991:6). She recalls: "I met the strongest man in the world, a large, hulking, healthy

Adam ... with a voice like the thunder of God", he "fills somehow that huge, sad hold I felt in having no father" and is "better than any teacher" (1992:233,237). Replacement father figure, literary genius, fabulous prince ... Hughes' mythically colossal 'perfection' provides, according to Jean Franco (1989), the impetus for the quandary of women's identity, that is, the inability to locate and define the female self independently from the influence of anyone else. There is biographical evidence to suggest that when Plath was married and monogamous, an aspect of her revelled in being controlled sexually and professionally by the deified Hughes. Breathing exercises, incantations, meditations and hypnotisms (Hayman 1991) illustrate how Hughes, at least initially, fulfilled the role of puppet master by controlling Plath's subconscious, shaping her existence, and dictating the form of words which would become were integral to the shaping of her poetic voice(s). In one instance, she is referred to by Hayman as the "effaced" woman poet whose husband represents her social self (1991:128).

This manipulation of Plath's creativity is patent in Hughes' assigning to her a writing exercise on the subject of the moon setting behind a yew tree, which provoked the poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (Hayman 1991). Here, Plath's use of a childlike syntax "mimes the dreamlike passivity of a hypnotic subject or of a pupil learning to write" (Britzolakis 2002:114). Despite the speaker's god-like status and the locational marker of the quasi-pictorial, Gothic-shaped yew tree that "points up", she "cannot see where there is to get to" and is met with a disquieting "blackness and silence". The speaking 'I' is hence denied the direction of her teacher-mesmerist which she so desperately craves. Britzolakis affirms that the teacher/pupil and confessor/penitent relationships in *Ariel* are metaphors of a self-reflexivity which installs "parental or quasi-parental figures in a position of ambiguous authority" (2002:66).

Plath's role as a puppet-like pupil controlled by Hughes' heartstrings is complicated by her rejection of his pedagogic manoeuvring: she was aware of the manipulated/manipulator dynamic which marked their relationship. In the poem "Snakecharmer", Plath offers a critical view of the male protagonist, one somewhat removed from the Messianism to which she submitted in her marriage. Initially, the puppet/snake is under the control of the charismatic puppeteer/charmer: "As the gods began one world, and man another, / So the snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere / With moon-eye, mouth-pipe". But the protagonist eventually tires of transforming the world, signalling a dissipation of power that could be construed as Plath's imaginative and implicit subversion of Hughes'

control: "he tires of music / And pipes the world back to the simple fabric / Of snake-warp, snake-weft".

Needless to say, the little-girlish Plath had a similar tendency to inflate the father figure to the status of a giant and then deflate this patriarchal archetype in her poetry. In "Daddy", for example, the hybridised God/Lucifer, hero/villain title character is, in the eyes/I's of his daughter, a clown-like individual of superhuman size who has various physical aberrations: "one grey toe / Big as a Frisco seal", "head in the freakish Atlantic", "boot in the face". The farcical, grotesque father figure is a facsimile, a doll or puppet constructed by his daughter-as-puppeteer: "I made a model of you". The creation of this model implies that the speaker reacts not to her real father but to the image[15] that he projects in her mind's eye. In order to rid herself of a paternal/marital manipulation, Plath's speaker has to destroy the double unreality denoted by the marriage idiom: a superimposition of the caricatured father or Nazi "man in black" on the estranged 'Ted Hughes' husband figure to whom the speaker says "I do, I do". Premised on the occult and puppetry connections between animate and inanimate objects, the speaker's model of "daddy" is the voodoo doll she uses to exorcise, via a "stake" or pin, her father/husband's control over her, thereby reducing him to human or perhaps subhuman size.

Plath's bond with her mother was also puppet-like, and several critics have suggested that Sylvia was used by Aurelia Plath as a substitute figure, a mask for Aurelia's failed self, in that she could live out vicarious experiences on her mother's behalf. Consider, for example, Sylvia's literary success, which was fiercely championed by her mother (Hayman 1991). In the acidic "Medusa", Plath's speaker presents the archetypal mother figure as a puppeteer who manipulates her daughter: "Your stooges / Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow". The repellant mother figure sustains her maternal body by "sucking" out her daughter's identity. The ambiguous line "There is nothing between us" implies either that no sustainable relationship exists between mother and daughter or that their identities are completely merged (Bundtzen 2006). If one considers Plath's literary work further, it is clear that Aurelia Plath saw herself in her daughter and *vice versa*.

In the performative repertoire which characterises *Letters Home*, for instance, Plath sometimes impersonates forms of her mother's voice – which we might hear as forms of voice which a mother prefers for her daughter – in that the diction and intonation signal the cheery, 'self-made' register of the advice columns and instructive features of popular 1950s women's magazines. This public voice of the all-American girl or cosy self which Plath privately ventriloquises, and often genuinely strives to 'own' in the public space of her

magazine prose and socialite persona, is distinct from the less contained voices of her poetry. For example, at the same time as her marriage encountered the first of its many difficulties, Plath covered up, gushing to her mother in an intentionally pleasing letter, "I don't know when I've been so happy or so well" (1992:274). Compare this with the poetically-mediated description of her marriage given in "Daddy", where Plath likens the husband/father figure to a "vampire" who "drank" her "blood" for "Seven years".

Despite her ire and frustration at being the object of familial and sociocultural manipulation, and despite the fact that she sought to consolidate her 'stringless' or unattached autonomy, Plath also, as mentioned earlier, seemed to yearn incongruously for some kind of powerful connection with, or even manipulation by, other, often powerful, people. Her desperate attempts to win the praise and recognition of Ted Hughes and her parents seem to prove this (Stevenson 1989). Significantly, it is at the point in her life when Plath became adrift or disengaged from all of her puppet-like identities and the puppeteers who were controlling her (Ted Hughes had left, her father was dead, and she decided to stay in England away from her mother) that life become unsustainable. In this regard, there exists an ambiguity with reference to the identities of puppet and puppeteer, as Plath clearly hoped to fulfil both roles. Perhaps this is evidence of her A-type personality; the ambitious young woman who intended to have it all?

The difficult synthesis of different theatrical roles is unmistakably played out in "Gulliver", where a life-sized puppet is symbolic of mortality. As a dead being, the puppet-addressee in the poem is seemingly granted freedom from the manipulations of life: "Unlike you, / With no strings attached", "You, there on your back, / Eyes to the sky". While death grants the protagonist freedom from social manoeuvring (the bowing and scraping, restraining and reaching), death is itself a manipulation, a "bribe" reminiscent of the seductive manipulations of mortality in "Death & Co.". In the *Ariel* collection, then, death is no real alternative to the social constraints which define life. The speaker in "Gulliver" recognises this, urging the protagonist to defy wholly becoming the prey of death: "Let this eye[/I] be an eagle".

In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", mortality is afforded a similar treatment. "Already half unstrung", the deceased men described here are comparable to inanimate puppets whose deaths carry with them an escape from manipulation, yet also point to a calculating objectification and lifelessness. For example, "A sallow piece of string" holds the head of one of the cadavers together. In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", as in "Gulliver", Plath may have been gesturing to her own conception of death as the only real escape from a

life defined by manipulation. Suicide was the one act which she committed entirely of her own volition, as all her other actions and roles were so patently inflected by the agency of other people. In this, it is plausible to argue that her suicide attempts and 'death-focused' poems constituted dress rehearsals for her actual performance of death, which, despite its own manipulative quality, signalled the culmination of her quest for autonomy.

Turning to Plath's role as a type of poetic puppeteer who manipulates language and the reader: this is clearly an imaginative attempt to gain some sense of power and control over her life which, at the height of her depression as a divorced single mother, she viewed as characterised by meaningless attachments. Of Plath, Rose attests: "All her life a reader had been someone to manipulate" (1991:11), and many of the speakers in Plath's poems participate self-reflexively in a puppet/puppeteer pantomime of "conscious inauthenticity" to reflect the theatricality of existence (de Man 1983:213). In "Lady Lazarus", for instance, Plath's speaker appears to engage in an incoherent, uncontrolled outpouring of self-loathing and terror, yet the poem simultaneously maintains the aesthetic control that is synonymous with great art and is hence no 'mere' confession. As a parodic version of the poet, Lady Lazarus stages the spectacle of herself through her use of singsong language and the shock tactic of blunt Americanisms: "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well. // I do it so it feels like hell". In utilising a manufactured and alienated vocal strategy, the speaker candidly manipulates her trauma and hence detaches herself emotionally from the action to a considerable degree (Uroff 1980).

Lady Lazarus' caricatural appreciation of her own act, which points to the mind's ability to ritualise horror, along with Plath's description of the poem as "light verse" (Alexander 1985:132), is further evident in her employment of a theatricalised irony which manifests itself in a number of jaunty hyperboles: "A sort of walking miracle", "And like a cat I have nine times to die", "It's the theatrical // Comeback in broad day" that "knocks me out". This self-parody is extended to incorporate Lady Lazarus' comparisons of herself to a martyred saint and her death(s) to the extermination of the Jews: "And there is a charge ... For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood // Or a piece of my hair or my clothes", "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade", "My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen". These quotations also show the speaker's status as a confessional commodity in comparison with some authentic exposure of 'self'. The speaker portrays the "peanut-crunching crowd" not as passive dupes, but as perverse victimisers, and this deflects attention from her complicity in her own victimisation.

In this regard, her primary impulse is to cast off her victimisation in order to resist the urgings of the malevolent crowd (Jump! *Jump*!), and part of this agency entails taking up the cry of murdered Jews and projecting it imaginatively into a shared suffering that has been silenced by society, and hence refused the power of revenge: "Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise", "I eat men like air". By enacting the ritual of agency and abasement which takes place in the psyche of the would-be suicide, Lady Lazarus assuages her constant desire to "annihilate" her "same, identical" self and is therefore able to control her destiny to a sizeable degree. Through her blurred identities as puppet and puppeteer – manipulated *by* the crowd's dictating of her performance even as she is manipulator *of* this audience – she is an omniscient observer of her own performance as it unfolds. Lady Lazarus vacillates between the speaking roles of subject and object, thereby underscoring the impossibility – for all 1950s women but especially the woman poet – of claiming a unified, autonomous voice.

Similarly manipulative is the all-knowing auctioneer/puppeteer in "The Applicant", who is eager to sell the "sweetie" and hence utters the recurring refrain, "Will you marry it, marry it, marry it". Britzolakis maintains that "the 'corporate' voice is crossed with the rhythms of the pop song" in a "bitter echo of Cliff Richard's 1959 hit song 'Livin' Doll'" (2002:151). The marriage contract in the poem is presented as a burlesque in that it is drawn up between the stilted mannequin figure and the avid, vacuous applicant. Despite her obvious scorn towards the institution of marriage and her parody of the main protagonists, the speaker is inclined to comply with any demands and make reciprocal claims "in order to strike a bargain" (Uroff 1980:163). In keeping with the ventriloquism of the verse, the internal debate or enclosed psychic world of the speaker/puppeteer and her prospective connubial puppets is akin to the fairground setting encapsulated in "Lady Lazarus". The superficially delightful, cunning speaker is provoked to manipulate the action through the same sexual fear which afflicts the partner-hungry applicant and the "sweetie" who hides in "the closet".

Plath's experimentation with the manipulated/manipulator interplay foregrounds her role as a puppeteer-poet whose skill in mimicking and manufacturing voices – particularly those which are fractured and/or deflected – supports the motif of ventriloquism. Again, Bryant's (2002) research on 1950s advertising is pertinent. She demonstrates how hearing voices, for example, along with automated speech and the manipulating of others as if they were susceptible or even automata, far from being necessarily indicative of madness or schizophrenic states, was perfectly normal for a housewife in Plath's day. All she had to do was turn on the television or the radio in order to hear disembodied voices, or find herself as if personally addressed by an earnest intimate holding an ostensible secret formula. It was

becoming increasingly commonplace, indeed, for consumer goods to give voice, swirling animatedly around the bathroom, sweeping persuasively along kitchen counters. This was the age of a new consumer magic, one in which goods came to represent the good life, and in which the good woman was the one who believed. How crazy could a woman become in a set-up like this? What was sane? Was the woman who listened to this sell seriously silly? Was she in danger of losing her mind or of egotistically over-reaching for the world? She was more than likely just normal, given an informing context which communicated the everyday message that in the U S of A anything could be 'realised'. In other words, ventriloquism in *Ariel* arises from Plath's historical context in which the seemingly surreal traverses reality and, in doing so; shows how the poetry offers sociocultural commentary rather than being merely associated with the 'confessional' (Dickie 1982).

Any discussion of the voice/body dialectic integral to the 'ventriloquial' needs also to reference Plath's stylisation of language and form as proposed by Dickie (1982) and Britzolakis (2002). These critics are concerned with Plath's deployment of a rhythmic intensity, idiomatic style, repeated sounds and phrases, and the transposition of linear narrative into fragmented, hallucinatory visuals. Let me use an initial example.

The poem "Daddy" persuasively conveys the voice/body dichotomy and illustrates how "We never know whether passion is acting out a confession on the stage of craft, or whether craft is plotting a poem on the stage of passion" (Hammer 2001:83). As Britzolakis (2002) avers, "Daddy" is a theatre of memory staging a repressed, phantasmatic oedipal drama within the conventions of lyric voice and, in doing so, as Dickie (1982) indicates, it shows how Plath's narrative interests elicit her prosodic ingenuity. As if candidly autobiographical, she re-enacts (acts out?) her suppressed emotions by ventriloquising her eight[16] year old self: "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time". Using the variable perspectives provoked by her double-consciousness and ambivalent feelings toward the memory of her father, Plath's 'I' attempts to envision a creativity for herself which is divorced from her meek, inert connection with her father and his world of patriarchal linearity and 'daddy-poetry'. For Britzolakis (2002), the exacerbated theatricalism denoted by this attempt at 'female' creativity precipitates a disorder of language and subjectivity that threatens the patriarchal cultural order.

To begin with, the speaker's self-analytical declarations manifest her perception of herself as divided: "I never could talk to you", "I think I may well be a Jew", "I have always been scared of *you*". This reworking can be likened to the complex directionalities of ventriloquism itself, which entails the powerful skill of expressing a voice *as if* through

another – the rupturing of the familiar 'fake illusion' – and yet the ventriloquist must be concealed or disguised *despite* both the poet and the audience knowing or being party to the fake illusion. Where, along such vectors, does truth lie?

Plath's speaker oscillates between a self that searches for clarity and control amid confusing emotional hyperbole and one that is consumed by singular, insulated wrath. For the elegy, especially one by a woman poet, this is a most distinctive positioning of the voice. The elegy as a poetic form has a long history in the articulation of male mourning – from the Greeks, to Keats, Yeats, Auden, Hardy and beyond. But Plath tries something new. She deliberately distorts the conventionalised vocal strategies of the elegy. Instead of using melancholic apostrophe and lyrical summoning in the service of emotional consolation, she writes with rage and anger; she shouts, she screams. Howls like an animal. She expresses taboos such as hatred, the very force of her feeling claiming for poetic voice, especially that of the woman poet, new tones and registers in a respectful, and respected, male poetic tradition. As Jahan Ramazani states, concerning voice and emotion in the poem, Plath "articulates and obscures" or reworks conventions of "consolatory mourning" to more protracted, violent and contradictory states of grief and connection, transgressing "[p]rohibitions against female anger" and indecorum (1993:1147,1144).

The influential 1960s poetry scholar, critic and anthologist A. Alvarez, on first hearing "Daddy", remarked that the poem seemed less like poetic voicing than "assault and battery" (1971:15). There is thus no question that "Daddy" is outspoken. In terms of ventriloquism, then, the woman poet is no male ventriloquist's dummy; as in Eliot's terms, productively innovative voicings become released in the encounter between tradition and the individual talent and enable women writers to free themselves "from the prostrate role assigned by literary and gender codes to the female mourner" (Ramazani 1993:1143)[17]. And yet I remain uneasy with William Wootton's facile assumption that Plath's rage means she had "found her full voice as a poet," one which would enable her straightforwardly to "reject" any borrowed aesthetic, or influences (2010:230). The ventriloquial soundings remain far more layered than this, cut by cross currents. Wootton himself, for example, draws our attention to Plath's close friendship with Alvarez, speculating that in many of the poems subsequently collected in *Ariel*, she was consciously writing in a style which would answer Alvarez's call, in his introduction to *The New Poetry* (1966), for poetry "Beyond the Gentility Principle".

In the hope of illustrating the shifting positions and identifications which characterise Plath's elegies, I now turn to a detailed discussion of "Daddy". In this poem, Plath brings

personal and political voices together in ways which have enraged many critics, and which subject a reader to disturbing effects that reach far beyond the now naturalised notion of metaphor as the yoking together by violence of disparate entities. Compare, for instance, the lines "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you" with "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through". In this volatile to and fro, Plath describes the affective ambiguity in terms of the speaker's male/female identity as antithetically incorporative of Nazi and Jew. The fragmented persona strives for balance using markedly unsettling rhetorical pairings. The supposed balance of father/daughter, then, is based on a potentially stereotypical coupling (Nazi/Jew) which yet retains an antithetical polarity in that the comparison is transgressive of conventional niceties: "I think I may well be a Jew", declares the speaker; and "If I've killed one man, I've killed two". Here, repressed public and private crises are rooted in a Cold War analogy between femininity and the pre-eminent cultural signifier of a victimised, ethnic 'otherness' (Britzolakis 2002). By 'dubiously' ventriloquising or projecting her voice into a historical persona, Plath draws brittle, satiric attention to the authentic/inauthentic boundary. As Susan Gubar notes of the idea of the genuine: "In the voice of a denizen of disaster, Plath mocks the frisson stimulated by the cultural industry she herself helped to spawn" (2001:206).

In "Daddy", fluidity of metaphoric identification or various transformations shift the reader's empathy for the victimised and victimiser and underscore the speaker's mental facility to juggle various images as a vulnerable and tenuous 'I'. Britzolakis refers to these role reversals as constituents of a "graphically schematized, flicker-book world of doubles and puppetlike projections" synonymous with feminine *duplicity* and its textual defamiliarising effects (2006:114). In the poem, for example, the speaker transforms from a prisoner in a "black shoe" to her father's murderer, while the father figure mutates from a devilish "Nazi" oppressor to a murder victim. Boundaries between persecutor/victim, object/subject, embodied/disembodied, and puppet/puppeteer subsequently collapse in a demonstration of the elusiveness and pliability of identity and the physical form. These rapid identity-based metamorphoses point to the shifting nature of the speaker's psyche and the only adequate means she believes will assist her, as ventriloquist or puppeteer, in managing her terror and thereby dissipating the paternal hegemony her father wields over memory and imagination.

This notion of the orderly disordered mind is played out further in what Britzolakis calls the fusion of "willed incantation and compulsive repetition" (2002:123). Recovering an incantatory, oral/aural element at the level of language or a primitive ritual of "verbal power

over reality" (Britzolakis 2002:108-9), Plath's speaker employs a ritualistic, childlike cadence as a taunting mechanism against the father figure: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years". The speaker's psychic disintegration and inner wildness increase in conjunction with the severity of her formal decorum and rigid control. As Hammer suggests, Plath's "rhymes and meter anchor an excessive 'pathological' diction" (2001:83). Or, according to Mutlu Konuk Blasing, Plath's "combination of a cool distance from and a helpless submission to the emotional states she portrays is a function of the juxtaposition of" a puppeteer-like "rigid formal control" – achieved via a nursery rhyme cadence – and an "increasingly uncontrolled" or puppet-like state of mind suggested through the speaker's emotions and the poem's fragmentary Holocaust analogies (1987:55-6). Further, given Plath's use of the formal voice associated with the elegy, which is evidently more than some simple ventriloquial adoption, she should be understood as "participating in a genre irreducible to raw outpouring, impersonal artifice, or prompt tally – a genre that allows her, like other poets, both to mask and to reveal grief, to dramatise and to disclose it" (Ramazani 1993:1142-43).

This poetic delivery, moving between voices of emotional link and detachment, additionally posits the notion of a remembered self and a remembering self or, redolent of "Lesbos", the disjuncture between the identities of child and adult. The hallucinatory shifts or dismemberments of temporal sequence and narratorial perspective point to a disturbance of memory and spoken language. The latter threatens to regress into aphasia and even 'gobbledygook'. Ventriloquising the 'little girl' speaker through her intermittent adoption of unsophisticated, childlike diction, Plath directs her sadness and wrath at her father's authoritarian discourse and points to the non- or mis-translation of his harsh staccato consonants into a preverbal, onomatopoeic language of infantile barbarism and mimicry: "Achoo", "gobbledygoo". Plath often echoes the language of children and their games as a tactic to illustrate the shattered world of childhood illusion or innocence – a world marked by ego differentiation and the threat of finality and separation. Such language is also analogous with the primitive gesture as tabooed sign of the 'primitive' Jew whose self and/or language was thought to be subhuman and tainted (Britzolakis 2002). In "Daddy", the speaker's inability to communicate solely via 'mature' language does not expose a lack of control so much as a reappropriation or feminisation of "the prevailing discourse of identity" away from the "monolithic influence of the father" (Lim 1997:69). Plath's speaker hereby acquires partial autonomy from her father-as-puppeteer.

The disjuncture between childlike and adult vocabulary is linked to Plath's allusions to muffled speech or oral 'gagging', which draws on the difficulty associated with the simultaneous voicing of and listening to a persona embodied in puppet form. Britzolakis (2002) argues that in the theatre of mourning, gestures of invocation and voicing are interchangeable with a muting and repression of voice based on the Plathian emblems of the cry and the wound. She goes on to describe gagging in terms of "a state of creative paralysis and blockage" (2002:113), of being "verbally repressed" (Plath 2000a:316). This idea manifests itself in "Daddy" in an image of the speaker's tongue sticking via an automaton-like repetition in conjunction with other vocal abnormalities which similarly evidence the speaker's struggle with her fractured identity. For example, the father figure is described as a "Panzer-man, panzer-man" and his daughter carries a "Taroc pack and my Taroc pack". In these cases, the mode of speech is just as important as what is being said (Knickerbocker 2009). Instead of matching the sophisticated poetic voicings of the influential male poets of the day, for instance, she gives us a speaker with an impediment, and, through the speaker's stunted articulations, Plath voices the otherwise unvoiceable, speaking into being aspects of the woman poet's feelings of powerlessness, her affliction of "speechless incarceration" (Lim 1997:97) within socially preferred languages and styles.

According to Konuk Blasing, "The 'you' of otherness strikes the keynote of the poem and raises the rhyming to a pitch of compulsive repetition that effectively drowns out the 'I'" (1987:56). In the line "I think I may well be a Jew", the final word rhymes with 'you'. This reference to the Nazi-like "daddy" suggests that Plath's speaker has in fact almost become her father, become 'you' – an image which inextricably unites the victim and torturer and reinforces the speaker's uneasy sense of identity. If one reconsiders the self-analytical statements referred to earlier, it is telling that the majority begin with the word "I" and end with the correlative "you" or an equivalent of the 'oo' sound, a playground chant of sorts. For instance: "I thought every German was you". Even the speaker's "do" is a 'lost in translation' echo of the father's "*du*" – his foreign, oppressive German tongue. These examples highlight the double language of melancholia or the ambiguity that characterises the speaker's quasi-musical sounds in terms of her masculine voicing of both her oppressive father and herself as a female oppressed Jew.

In opposition to the controlled sterility of suburban American reality at the time (in effect a propaganda of coherent all-American identity), the 'pores' or holes in the linguistic figuration or vocal body of Plath's speaker are associated with impure, uncontrollable "inarticulacy or aborted speech" confounded by "the fantasy of a seamlessly unified, 'pure',

authorial 'I'" (Britzolakis 2002:16). Further, as Luce Irigaray maintains, the woman can only experience herself "fragmentarily", in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess" (1985:30). As such, Hayman suggests that the daughter figure in "Daddy" is "carried off to Dachau" or 'disciplined' by the historically "obscene German language" (1991:29), an exemplar of helpless manipulation in comparison with deliberate puppetry. Here, the foreignness or alienating quality of the father's paternal tongue is once more apparent, with the poet's language yet again acquiescing to the imprisoning 'you' or 'not-I' of otherness (Britzolakis 2002). In keeping with the metaphor of oral gagging, the speaker divulges that she is unable to converse with her domineering father:

> I never could talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
>
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich,
> I could hardly speak.
> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene
>
> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.

At this juncture, the father's voice threatens to annihilate the speaker in an extract in which the speaker's English 'I' and her father's self-assertive, clipped German "ich" intermix grotesquely. In this regard, the thick, foreign "ich" is the assailing "jaw" or "barb wire" of a pre-empting paternal language or a wounding orality which impedes and controls the speaker's tongue and paralyses her emotionally and creatively. This imperilling male orality is linked to Plath's mouthing of the words of other poets based on the monolithic 'Law of the Father', an inheritance whose masculine models she is schooled to admire. In Rich's words, once the female speaker enters language, she is bound to an authoritative "oppressor's language" which seizes her speech and cannot adequately articulate her experiential reality (2002:151). In "Daddy", Plath's return to a pre-linguistic *chora* underscores her need to find "a new voice" distinct from her Poetic Father (Tarlo 1999:100), yet the speaker cannot cast out the syllables she wishes to – "Ich, ich, ich, ich" – as this language has been introjected. In other words, these syllables depict the speaker's fractured, corrupted first person self, a self whose constituency, in many ways, can be likened to the fragmentation and corruption associated with representations of the Holocaust (Helle 2007). As a corollary, Plath's speaker-as-puppet finds herself not only talking "like a Jew", but also involuntarily

ventriloquising her father, his 'I'. This ambiguity is reflected perhaps most effectively in the culminating stanza of the poem, where, as indicated in the previous chapter, the speaker-as-puppet becomes a puppeteer who usurps her father's power.

Clearly, the speaker's allusions to dysfunctional speech and muteness underscore the linguistic hesitancy and fragmentation of female identity patent in *Ariel*. For Britzolakis (2002), Plath's subjectivity is suspended between tropes of the muted and unleashed voice, the oral and aural, the linguistic and non- or prelinguistic. In particular, the gagged mouth and its concomitant repetitive speech convey an automatism whereby the puppet/persona defers control to the ventriloquist. In much the same way, it has been argued by Bryant, a middle class post-war culture projected its identity via technological appliances and nascent forms of mass media such as radio, television and advertising. She cites the slogan of a 1950s advertisement for the Caloric gas range: "So AUTOMATIC it almost thinks for me" (2002:27)[18], and proposes that this mechanisation, far from re-personalising the individual (Marchand 1985), mimics Plath's feelings of depersonalisation – common in the 1950s where the market-oriented personality posed a threat to individuality (Britzolakis 2002).

In "Elm", for instance, the speaker's repetitive reference to "the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill" hints at Plath's android-like striving for personal 'perfection'. This is associated with what Bryant identifies as an IMAX professional singularity – the desire to be so perfect that the individuality of the self is erased and replaced by a robotic de-sensitisation and conformity. Further, this hyper-identification is linked to the public approval Plath would receive for her perfect enactments of the roles of all-American girl, wife and mother – roles which, in many ways, Plath viewed as mechanised. Likewise, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther, in the throes of her New York world disintegrating before her eyes or becoming two-dimensional, reflects on her own mechanistic physiological responses: "like the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy, my own mouth started to quirk up" (1966:97). This loss of power associated with the automated speech of the ventriloquist is reinforced in "The Applicant", where the "sweetie" for sale is a housewife-machine who, akin to the 1950s *Anacin* headache tablet that works "fast Fast FAST" (Bryant 2002:27), can "talk, talk, talk" in the empty, manipulated manner of a vaudevillian ventriloquist's dummy. This empty-headed sound without substance should be read in conjunction with what Bryant paradoxically describes as the housewife's status as the 'smartest' of appliances. Similarly, in "Paralytic", muteness is equated with a "flat" identity: "Photographs visit me– / My wife, dead and flat, in 1920s furs, / Mouth full of pearls". In "Medusa", the capacity of the mother figure to 'gag' her daughter is suggested when the speaker avers, "Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs".

This focus on an automated degradation of sound variously defined by its subject's muteness, hesitancy, and difficulty in speaking, all symptomatic of a verbal-mental paralysis and hence of the "condition of being manipulated" (Ostriker 1982:77), is a corollary of Plath's "gagged" and 'programmed' identity as a woman in both the domestic and professional contexts. Whether as wife or poet, it seems, Plath experienced her femaleness as forms of inauthenticity, even as she struggled to speak in other words. In a letter to Ruth Fainlight, for example, Plath discloses how she felt choked by so-called domestic bliss (Stevenson 1989). In other words, the metaphors of oral gagging in the *Ariel* poems are implicated in the physical and figurative constraints to which the woman poet and her broken 'I' were subject by the shackles of a patriarchy which silenced her, or assumed authority to speak on her behalf: "Both automatism and disunity are symptoms of an affective deficiency, a lack of meaning, the unrelation between the self and the world" (De Lauretis 1988:129). To cite Britzolakis again, the poems signal a "refutation of, and struggle against, a despairing voicelessness" (2002:214). In considering the presence of automated voices in Plath's verse, it is clear that these vocal aberrations subvert Steven Gould Axelrod's audacious argument that Plath is able to "gain ... control" over language and thereby quell her sense of alienation (1990:75).

In *Ariel*, the failure to acquire control over the voice is presented in a heightened manner in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" – a poem which explores the ventriloquial notion of the polyphonic utterance as opposed to the monological voice. Once again, this brings me to the notion of Plath's poetry as supposedly confessional. In comparison with assumptions of unmediated outpouring, I am arguing, the *Ariel* poems deliberately stage the difficult drama of female subjectivity and voicing. Of the collection in its entirety, Bundtzen "finds multiple subject positions and forms of address by which 'authority is distributed across a range of voices'", with the result that readings of the poems as confessions of a single life are undermined (Helle 2005:644). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", 'identity' is an unfinished and unfinishable entity comprising multiple, layered selves or voices in the shape of the ventriloquist's puppet. (However, as my analysis has already suggested, the critic should not interpret such voices as evidence of Plath's schizophrenia, as they are situated within the domestic surrealism and displaced voicings of 1950s advertisements [Bryant 2002].) In the poem, the "angrily clambering", cacophonous bees in the box represent uncontrollable, 'controversial' voices and exert upon the ventriloquist-speaker an alluring quality of appeal, newness, even celebrity that overshadows her: "The box is locked, it is dangerous. / I have to live with it overnight / And I can't keep away from it". This mysterious "clean wood box"

epitomises the speaker-as-ventriloquist's 'perfection' and the control or surety of tradition and form encapsulated in her impersonation of other poets. These qualities are forfeited for the uncertainty and peril of the booming and dynamic ventriloquised voices or creative selves caged in the box.

Underscoring the fusion of the oral/aural and the written word, Helle suggests that the poem deals "self-consciously with what it means to have a mind 'swarming' with sounds and letters" (2005:638). As Plath's speaker asks, "How can I let them out? / It is the noise that appals me most of all, / The unintelligible syllables. / It is like a Roman mob, / Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!" This disturbance of sound is powerful enough to disrupt the sculptural self-containment and finality of the poem-as-image by infiltrating and undermining "the symbolic order in localized weak spots". As Britzolakis posits: "knots and 'snags' in the smooth, controlled flow of meaning announce a subterranean text of orality" in which the unleashed tongue "recovers a prehistoric era, buried by repression, in the evolution of the 'I'" (2006:112). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the speaker is drawn to the linguistic primitivism of the voices which threaten her "with loss of sovereign control over words and meaning" (Britzolakis 2006:120), yet her fear manifests in feelings of hoped-for anonymity, muteness and detachment: "I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree".

The conclusion of the poem implies an impending release from the suffocating convention and self-control embodied in the image of the box: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. // The box is only temporary". Here, Plath's persona-as-ventriloquist grants the subversive voices or 'othered' selves in the box the power to speak. The suspense tied to this intimated vocalisation is accentuated by the speaker's description of the box as the possible "coffin of a midget / Or a square baby", which evokes images of a jack-in-the-box puppet and a socially 'freakish' dwarf. Plath's engagement with these bizarre, loud, subversive identities – an entire mass cultural fairground of odd voices – underscores her own perilous struggle toward the consolidation of her multiplicitous self.

The dichotomy between silence and sound crosses over into the technological arena, where material objects such as the radio and telephone present further evidence of the aberrations of the ventriloquial voice. These devices focus the reader's attention on communication by problematising the relationship between 'voice' and 'body' in line with the 'vocalic uncanny' (Connor 2000). The radio and telephone also speak to the contemporary 'wired' generation and its public/private communicatory technology which is at the epicentre of popular consumption of Plath and her work (Rasula 2009). In the 1950s

context, the radio and telephone are themselves highly ambiguous technologies. They are associated with Cold War intrusive devices of surveillance, propaganda and eavesdropping on what 'ought' to be private, and they are central to the culture of a feminised domesticity which is itself unevenly dismissed as low even while women turn such forms to new modes of community, gossip and related female knowledge. In "Lesbos", for example, the speaker addresses herself: "You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio / Clear of voices and history, the staticky / Noise of the new". Here, Plath conveys the idea that the speaker's transmission or communication of her identities as a housewife and mother has been rendered defective by way of her vocal outbursts in the domestic context. This public/private impeding of communication subsequently affords the transmission of an unchanging, persistent, and evidently grating "Noise of the new" embodied in the speaker's emergent, glamorous female self. "Lesbos" hence illustrates how Plath utilises the radio as a 'subversive' device ever associated with the dissolution of the public/private divide and the ability to create, via the ephemeral sound, strangely enduring images in the listener's mind.

The prevalence of telephonic metaphors in the *Ariel* poems is further fascinating. Paradoxically, while the telephone is an instrument of a mechanised or simulated vocality, it is also an important means of expressing oneself to an implied auditor, that is, it is an agent of disembodied speaking which both enables and masquerades as 'communication'. In *Ariel*, Plath disrupts the homeliness connected to the 1950s soap opera quality of the telephone as a woman-to-woman 'gossip device'. In other words, the seemingly mundane household object of the telephone is interrupted or charged with meaning that threatens received notions of femininity. In etymological terms, evocative of Britzolakis' study of the non-symbolic language of regression, the word 'phone' denotes a sound, voice or undifferentiated emission, "a plopping expletive which may or may not coalesce into meaning". Akin to the noise in "The Arrival of the Bee Box", these viscous, leaking sounds "achieve syllables" as opposed to amounting to words (Shulkes 2005:160). In the polysyllabic "Daddy", for instance, the speaker reveals her past yearning to resume contact or reconnect with her dead father, only to quell this need by rendering the telephone functionless: "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you", "So daddy, I'm finally through. / The black telephone's off at the root, / The voices just can't worm through". In terms of the latter, the father figure's death ensures that the undifferentiated, ritualistic "voices" that have haunted the speaker are muted or disconnected, the wires 'jammed'. Potentially, these "voices" belong not only to Otto Plath, but also to the speaker's child/adult selves and/or Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill (Stevenson 1989). In this regard, the telephone is portrayed as the "muck funnel" and "many-

holed earpiece" of the poem "Words, heard by accident, over the phone", and is a device which carries with it a spookiness and disconcertingly erotic possibility. "Daddy" implies the fluidity and disembodiedness of the telephonic voice as a ventriloquial tool, and further underscores Plath's complicated notion of 'identity' as a fragmented, mediated, and disassociated entity instead of something coherent and achieved.

Plath reprises the telephone metaphor in "Elm", where the tree with its "great tap root" thinks that the speaker will fear "the bottom". On the contrary, the speaker-elm has already plummeted to these depths and is hence unafraid: "I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets. / Scorched to the root / My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires". This imagery, redolent of "Daddy" and its functionless telephone "off at the root", signals the power of the phone to transmit vocal words of pain. In "The Munich Mannequins", the telephone is conflated more directly with a lack of communication or the entombed female voice, the 'I' inscribed within alienations (Britzolakis 2006): "the black phones on hooks" are "Glittering and digesting // Voicelessness". Here, the absence of vocal freedom or ironic muteness via the communicatory device of the telephone is linked to the voicelessness associated with the ultra-perfect, lifeless mannequins as exemplars of Hollywood and the 'frozen' or 'petrified' imagination that can only be expressed through the substitution of reified commodities.

Telephonic imagery surfaces again in the surrealistic "Medusa", where the speaker addresses the title character as an "Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable", "Tremulous breath at the end of my line". In these terms, Plath's speaker is inextricably and multiply connected to her mother via a link which mutates, metaphorically, through images of a fishing line, telephone line, tightrope, and/or umbilical cord. In particular, the words "My mind winds to you" evoke connotations of a mother-child fusion of thoughts and conflate images of an umbilical cord and a phone 'line'. The jellyfish-telephone wire keeps itself, "it seems, in a state of miraculous repair"; hence keeping mother and daughter in implicit or subconscious communication with each other: "I didn't call you", "nevertheless / You steamed to me over the sea". The connections are in part sustaining, yet the mother figure clearly also has an intrusive voice, one that "undercuts the surface tranquillity" of the domestic scene and connects it "dialogically to the world beyond" (Strine 1989:29). Further, Shulkes refers to the domesticated device of the telephone as "an intrusive appendage, an 'instrument' that seizes and interpolates the eavesdropper and then abruptly 'withdraw[s] its tentacle'" (2005:160). This withdrawal is indicated when the speaker in "Medusa" attempts to sever the bond with her medusa-like mother: "Off, off, eely tentacle". However, given that

the telephonic connection between mother and daughter is associated with the inventive strategy of an enacted intimacy and yet also with insidiousness and control, the speaker ambivalently wishes to extend the link and to sever it – evocative of the tentacled Medusa herself.

Plath's use of telephonic imagery demonstrates how she perceives language or voice as a drama that terrorises and sullies the subject from outside, that is, via external objects whereby signifiers penetrate through the ear. Rather than purely linked to a cosy female domestic sphere, Plath shows how the telephone mediates the private/public divide and is perverted by muteness and "an unnatural vicariousness of watching and listening" akin to Cold War culture (Britzolakis 2002:24). As such, Plath does not simply present the phone as a device that helps words to "get through"; instead, it may create a 'broken down telephone' alienation in the face of language. Her personae are caught up in speech's or culture's waste products, those uncontrollable, dirty "word-things spewing out of the [phallic] receiver" (Shulkes 2005:161). In this manner, the female voice is plagued by the impurity that has come to define the female body or female identity in a demonstrably male culture.

Plath's vocal impersonations in the *Ariel* poems constitute a means of lifting the 'dirty' burden of selfhood and an attempt to articulate 'self' into being. The indeterminacy of the voice(s) in the poems becomes a motif of the poet as variously possessed and dispossessed of an appropriate voice (Bernard 2003) – a struggle which is mirrored in Plath's use of an echo effect. "Medusa", for instance, plays on the idea of the womb as an echo chamber via Plath's conflation of telephonic metaphors with maternal- and paternal-based imagery: "umbilicus", "water rod", "Touching and sucking", "placenta". The speaker-puppet hears the echo of her mother-ventriloquist's voice in her own: "Tremulous breath at the end of my line". Plath describes this uncommonly symbiotic relationship in the *Journals*: "And you were frightened when you heard yourself stop talking and felt the echo of her voice, as if she had spoken in you, as if you weren't quite you ... as if her expressions were growing and emanating from your face" (2000a:64-5). This odd, queasy juncture, at once a disembodiment and a fusion of bodies and voices, points to the capacity of the ventriloquial voice to disturb boundaries or unsettle the myth of a unified identity.

Illustrations of this abound in the *Ariel* poems. Take "Morning Song", for instance, where the line "Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival" denotes a transferral and modification or distortion of sound from its original source – parent – to child, and perpetuates the idea of the different locales – the 'female' (natural) womb and the 'male' (cultural) museum – as echo chambers of an original sound. "The Bee Meeting" offers

additional evidence of Plath's use of the echo effect. The speaker's paralysing fear, triggered by the bees and her premonition of her own death, creates a feeling of disembodiment represented by the echo-as-heartbeat: "They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear". Here, a reader should note the varied capacity of Plath's vocal strategies. The echo effect is a device that points to the liberation of the ventriloquist's voice from the confines of his or her body, thereby enabling a voice to be thrown into other locations and entities; yet, at the same time, the echo is tied to an automated speech pattern which signals the constriction associated with the ventriloquist's voicing of his or her puppet. Both automated speech and the echo subscribe to Britzolakis' (2006) theory of a linguistic primitivism via repetition which harnesses the uncanny power of sound and point to a more performative rhetoric of vocal utterance than one might expect of so-called confessional poetry. The gagged/echo dichotomy is also evocative of Plath's self-reflexivity, which Britzolakis refers to as "alternately paralysing and enabling" (2002:17).

The disembodied voice assumes another guise in "Words", where language is seen as escaping the speaker's control. Given that visual and aural experience is "subject to deformation and mutilation" in many of the *Ariel* poems (Britzolakis 2002:201), the one-word line "Axes" implies that the speaker's vocal emissions have been severed from her body and are now only "dry and riderless" aural traces. This disconnection of words from the body of the speaker and the body of Plath's poem and archive is indicative of Plath's protean poetic stance in which the 'self' is equivocally defined in terms of muteness and alienation, the struggle to voice, along with a vocal indefinability implicated in multiple subjectivity. As Emma Jones expresses it, the body of the poem mirrors the body of the female speaker: there is a "correlation between the internal mechanisms of the body and the mechanisms of poetic figuration" (n. d.:88). Moreover, the dissociation of words from the 'self' implies that language carries limitations in terms of its ability to represent the self accurately (Barthes 1977).

In this lack of a holistic identity, the desire for self-emergence is reconstituted by the speaker's death-like condition seen in her mirror reflection: "A white skull, / eaten by weedy greens". As in "Fever 103°", "Words" portrays death as a form of purification through the scattered or fragmented personality's move toward a coherent core and away from the contamination of external factors. As highlighted earlier, echoes are often used by Plath as a poetic representation of this contamination and movement or distortion of sound: "And the echoes! / Echoes travelling / Off from the centre like horses". The final stanza of the poem alludes to the immortality of poetry versus the mortality of the poet herself. The latter's

legacy is symbolised in the action of the "indefatigable hoof-taps" – musical beats which counter the immobility or stasis of life.

Tied to ventriloquism's obscuring of the distinction between ventriloquist and puppet, 'original' and copy, the echo plays on the 'Hall of Mirrors' original-copy relationship in terms of the notion of a modified and/or replicated image from an original source. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991), Rose argues that Plath has become a ghost whose effigy haunts her original self or body, while Helle (2004) describes the *Ariel* poems as spectral 'other bodies' or ghostly presences that are disconnected or severed from the body of the deceased author. Underlying such metaphors are inherently unstable notions of real and projection, and the premise is that readers and literary critics are not dealing with 'Plath the original' but 'Plath the representation' as embodied in her writing. The blurred model-copy relation is extrapolated in the poem "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", where a puppeteer-woman is anxious at her ownership of a malevolently ogling, puppet-like "model head". As an indestructible image or double of the woman, this model resents its lifelessness and subordination to its living counterpart. Although threatened by the model head and its facility to mirror her own spite, the lady feels "loath to junk it", as the harm she could inflict on the model could very well hurt her. The speaker indicates: there is a "sly nerve" which "knits each original to its coarse copy". The model head is a symbol of Plath's commercial self-image – the model head of a model Smith student – which she made and as it were 'gave' to her mother. The speaker's struggle to dispose of the head echoes Plath's struggle to shed her commercialised public role(s) and her inability to reach some sort of integration in terms of identity.

Evocative of celebrity culture and the gazed-at female body, Plath's utilisation of the motifs of puppetry and ventriloquism recapitulates how she "channels performance through a foreign body, using illusion, exhibition, and animation, to achieve" linguistic disguise (Latshaw 1978:29). By speaking through different public/private personae, Plath presents 'identity' and 'voice', from the woman poet's acoustic perspective, as defined by an irremediable fluidity. This refusal of the body-in-language to submit to aesthetic norms of integration and wholeness demonstrates how Plath flouts the strictures attached to a static, unified identity synonymous with the ostensibly male lyric space while simultaneously envisaging some sort of powerfully articulated, voiced 'I'.

In the *Ariel* poems which seem gender-indeterminate, that is male, the dramatised speakers, the appropriation and manipulation of conventional forms, language or imagery indicate the woman poet's relationship to the dominant order which she *seems* to support.

According to Dowson, "[t]he other, woman-centred aesthetic, frequently signifies the unrepresented or unrepresentable, often through metaphor or elliptical typography which allow for associative, rather than directly linear, syntax and meaning. This aesthetic confronts cultural imperatives about femininity, including the pejorative assumptions about the 'woman poet'" (n. d.).

Broadly speaking, as a varied or multiple metaphor in relation to 'voicing' in *Ariel*, ventriloquism speaks to silence and utterance, to constraint and freedom, and to the power and subjugation of the woman poet. Plath challenges the divide between the popular and the experimental avant-garde, her 'voice' variously genteel and taboo, her forms traditional and innovative. The poems of a writer such as Plath

> are explicitly about the limits and possibilities of speech, particularly female speech, in a culture that does not permit [or encourage] women to actively participate in the public sphere: on the one hand, they depict women's inability to speak without either being spoken *through* by other texts that they inadvertently quote and endorse or being spoken *for* by men, and on the other, they model the ways in which women can articulate their selves by the ironic, parodic, decontextualization and re-framing of these utterances. (Chapman 2005:4)

Here, it is important to remember that Plath's poetry is not only a precursor of the outspoken female subjectivities that came to characterise later women's poetry, but is also curiously prescient in terms of postmodern challenges to earlier assumptions regarding the expressivity of 'self', and the coherent and supposedly authentic subject as voiced in lyric poetry. Instead, in moments in Plath's poems, attention is drawn to language as opaque and mediated rather than transparent. In addition, the disembodying and re-embodying of the voice in performance reinforces the undecidability of boundaries between inner and outer spaces, the ingested and the extragested. Through Plath's contextualisation of 'sound' in a 1950s cultural field, she not only underscores the importance of 'the ear', but also offers a useful sounding board for debates on 'personal' voice in today's world, with its links to celebrity g/clamour, 'striptease' self-revelation, and the digitised circulation of self status. *Ariel* plays on issues of power, ownership, authenticity, aberration, and identity within a culture of performance and, in doing so, offers an expanded "range of performance-effects" (Moses 2007:107). If Plath strikes us, after all these years, as a poet with a distinctive "singularity of voice", I have shown that this distinctiveness is less the result of the "most famous Plath" being "the extremist Plath" (Wootton 2010:235), but, instead, a striking multivocality in which a female, writerly self is uneasily situated in relation to cultural debate.

CHAPTER FOUR: CLOTHING

In the *Journals*, Plath asks: "Why can't I try on different lives, like dresses, to see which fits best and is most becoming?" (2000a:101), her very phrasing implying an awareness of clothes in relation to 'being' as presence as well as projected identity. The ability of clothes to function as modes of identity change, masking and projection is an important issue persistently overlooked in Plath scholarship (see Uroff 1980, Hayman 1991 and Wagner 2000, for example). Britzolakis (2006) is one of the notable exceptions here, exploring the equation of clothing with multiple, shifting points of identification, while Butler (1999), similarly, considers the significance of manipulated dress codes in the 'wearing' of gender identity. While perhaps new to literary scholarship, this is an established precept in cultural studies' theorising of fashion: Craik argues, for example, that as a mediatised site on which cultural ideals can be fabric-ated, the female body is socially and artistically 'worn' or "constructed as a surface to be worked on and a volume to be sculpted and moulded" according to criteria of beauty, gender, and clothing (1994:72). In some ways, Plath's life and work broadcast the conflicting ideas that clothes are synonymous with superficial gloss even while they enable the enactment of public roles, and I hope to show that the collection *Ariel* offers a variety of fashion fantasies which capture the ambiguity tied to the motif of attire, demonstrating how women "consume and use magazines in complex ways" (Craik 1994:54).

The primary marketing thesis of 1950s fashion magazine *Mademoiselle* was how a woman looked, premised on the assumption that any "alternations in a woman's appearance initiate psychological shifts" or a series of 'self-murders' (Leonard 1992:69). In this regard, Plath's dyeing her hair blonde "was more than a surface alteration; she was 'trying out' a more daring, adventuresome personality" or exchanging one commodified personality for another (Plath 1992:138). Based on this interplay of public/private in relation to tensions between 'high art' and 'pulp fiction', I intend to consider how the discourses of fashion magazines and popular culture were "crucial sources" of Plath's writerly aesthetic and her "emerging poetic voice" (Bryant 2002:24) in that they played on the contradictions and tensions around different orientations and roles for women. In a social context in which binarisms were naturalised, Plath's female personae negotiate received oppositions such as public/private, male/female, liberation/constriction, and individuality/conformity, and I suggest that by taking account of the discursive repertoire of fashion – at once susceptible to change and yet part of an enduring code – I will be able to demonstrate how Plath's *Ariel*

collection is both shaped by and resistant to the discourses of appearance circulated in women's magazines.

As a range of cultural studies theorists have argued, glossies such as *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue*, as well as less glamorous titles like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, offer equivocal "pleasures for women readers and spectators". On the one hand, rather than "reinforcing 'patriarchal' relations", these magazines "are said to offer women fantasies, identities, and momentary escape from the contradictions and pain of everyday life" (Craik 1994:9). They are also, however, commonly censured for what many (among them, Millum 1975) claim is the circulation of limited roles for women: mother, housewife, and sex kitten are a few examples. What are the implications for representations of identity in Plath's poems? This chapter will explore possible responses to such a question, locating the poetry in the context of a commodity culture which 'dressed' or 'fashioned' female understandings of self and agency in ways that were both socially preferred and yet which also seemed to offer fulfilment. As Craik confirms of the time in which Plath was writing, a "consumer culture directed at women selling women an image", or images, "of ideal selfhood was nurtured through advertising, shop windows, consumer tie-ins with Hollywood, and the images presented in women's magazines" (1994:209).

Prior to an examination of the *Ariel* poems, I wish to discuss how clothes and popular periodicals impacted on aspects of Plath's everyday life *beyond* her writing and, in doing so, I hope to illuminate inconsistencies between the 'art' and the 'life'. From a young age, Plath was well-acquainted with the worlds of both *haute couture* and mainstream fashion, and critics such as Rachel Moseley have shown that her subjectivity, accordingly, was "articulated formally around dress" (2002:44). Connors affirms, for instance, that when Plath was twelve, "she made two glamorous cutout women with huge wardrobes of wildly colourful and flamboyant outfits, reflecting her interest in the 1940s film and print culture, as well as the world of fashion" (2007:68). Later, as indicated in the *Journals*, Plath as a young woman made a number of detailed references to her own clothing in a register borrowed from the descriptors typical of fashion writer *cum* designer style: "I knew I looked nice – in my simply cut black velvet suit with the full skirt as a caress and the red jersey showing through the scooped neckline ... If character is fate, I sure am adjusting mine under my lucky star" (2000a:28-9). Such comments, evidently self-aware about the linking of appearance and 'desired' outcome in the female psyche, also provide a projective indicator that "image, line and colour" would come to play a crucial role in Plath's sense of poetic representation (Helle 2005:638). In the extract from her *Journals*, Plath's diction and tone of voice seem

transplanted from a popular 1950s fashion magazine and, indeed, her 1953 invited guest editorship with the New-York-based *Mademoiselle* attests further to her eye for the visual[19]. One might add, moreover, that *Mademoiselle* was at the time considered *the* magazine for college women, and that Plath avidly sought publication of her journalism, poetry and fiction in this socially approved and validating context. Whether this attests to her proclivity to swallow the superficial or to her canny understanding of the tactics required by the woman who sought advancement in a male world, well, critics remain divided. Certainly, if the male collegiates of Plath's time were being prepared for success in the professions, particularly in the 'grey-suited' poetic tradition, their female peers were explicitly being groomed for lives as stylish wives. In such an ideological context, Plath's claiming of whatever public visibility she could acquires at once a terrible pathos and a powerful agency. She wrote herself as much as she wrote poems. The painterly 'eye' or visual memory is integral to Plath's verbal imagination or personal 'I', and Helle explains that Plath was aware of "the possibilities of her written-ness, of the eye of the reader upon her" (2005:638). Similarly, her public self was from the outset a fashioned persona, and Plath dressed in expensive dresses, hats and shoes, showed herself the writer *cum* celebrity attending fashion shows, dances, promotional luncheons, art exhibitions, film premieres and theatre productions, and frequently posing for promotional photographs.

The struggle to mediate between intelligence and sexuality, the 'academic' and the 'popular', 'male' and 'female' informs not only Plath's elite or high art discourse of poetry, but even the clothing advertisements featured in *Mademoiselle*. The "Prestige Jr. Commuter dress", for example, ensured "smooth transfers from desk to evening or town!", and Munsingwear advised, "To get through college fashionably, you need a high 'LQ' (Lingerie Quotient)" (Hammer 2001:74). Moreover, in the article "So You're a Brain ..." women are reassured that their intelligence enhances their social shares since their bodies are 'stock portfolios' which can be traded according to the paradigm of a male-defined 'femininity'. In other words, most paradoxically, women's intelligence does not preclude their *becoming* 'women', that is, socially desirable *feminised* versions of femaleness such as fashion plates, sex objects, stylish wives and domesticated mothers (Leonard 1992). An apt reference is Helle's analysis of the cover photograph of the *Unabridged Journals* (Anchor Books edition), where Plath appears with a "scarf casually draped over a smart choker necklace" in what points to a layering of popular/academic identities – middle-class fashionista meets bohemian *artiste* (2005:636). As Helle illustrates, Plath envisaged herself the perfect model of the so-called incompatible roles of erudite woman and visually alluring sex siren, and as I am

implying, it is precisely the dissolution of boundaries between the discourses of 'male' academia and 'female' clothing which enables Plath to (re)fashion identity from the shifting perspective of the woman poet.

Plath repeatedly used clothes to manipulate her public image or to perform her body for the desired effect (Butler 1999). Wagner describes Plath as a "tall, too-smartly-dressed girl" with "streaked blonde hair" who had arrived in Cambridge carrying brand-new "matching luggage" (2000:47). The implication is clear: Plath-the-performer, well aware of the social need to stage a scene or to announce an 'entrance' using the proper accessories, evidently believed that travelling on a prestigious Fulbright scholarship required suitcases equal to her present distinction and to her future aspirations. As students at Smith, Plath and her female peers "dressed like fashion models" to impress potential suitors (Hayman 1991:46), and many of the scenes in *Ariel* are constructed to similar effect, albeit for a different end. Take into account the following examples: the speaker in her stylish "Italian hat" in the poem "The Bee Meeting", where Plath offers commentary on the ability of fashion to mediate the speaker's outsider status; or "The Munich Mannequins", where chic dress signals an attrition of self or individuality. True to 1950s women's magazines, Plath's actual wearing of chic, expensive outfits to strike a sophisticated pose and thereby ingratiate herself with high society contributed to her attempted maintenance of the 'ladylike' façade which she projected to the outside world. Such clothes were also, however, objects of (failed) concealment, objects associated with illusory and undesirable public roles, on which she sporadically expelled her rage.

For instance, after she scarcely "escaped being raped by a rich Peruvian delegate to the United Nations" and got lost on the New York subway surrounded by deformed vagrants, Plath expressed her fear at the temporary slippage of her stylish, poised public identity by throwing her new, expensive dresses out of her hotel room window (Hayman 1991:53). This incident is reprised in *The Bell Jar*, where Plath depicts Esther tossing items from her wardrobe piece by piece to the night wind in an abjuration of the commodified, glamorous public personae she has constructed for herself in order to survive New York by matching its highly styled, even stylised, standards of female behaviour (Wagner 1988). These incidents suggest that despite her complicity in reproducing images of femininity promulgated by fashion magazines, Plath was aware of the stereotyping, exploitation and falsity of fashion features and advertising (Craik 1994). Consider a March 1952 *Mademoiselle* article entitled "What Makes You Beautiful?", which attributes a woman's devotion to cosmetics and a 'made up' public appearance (or façade) as the primary measure of her sanity (Leonard

1992). Compare, too, Esther's and Plath's mental breakdowns with notes in Plath's *Unabridged Journals*, where she habitually revels in her construction of an 'approved' image of femininity in what could only be described as another 'IMAX' episode: "Sunlight raying ethered through the white-net of the new formal bought splurgingly yesterday in a burst of ecstatic rightness ... God knows when I've felt this blissful beaming euphoria, this ineluctable ecstasy"! (2000a:76).

The constraining parameters of such acceptable 'femininity' provide material for mockery in the poem "Dialogue en Route", in which Eve's 'Jackie Kennedy' and '1950s Smith girl' personae fantasise about the finer pleasures of life: "Chanel, Dior gowns, / filet mignon and walloping wines ... Valentino's crack technical talent". Pause to consider the intentional instabilities of language and register: a pointedly Francophile vocabulary expressive of aesthetic sophistication is suddenly interrupted by the colloquial, even bathetic term 'walloping'. Further, Eve's cultural repertoire also includes surprising references, more conceptually erudite than a reader might expect. She is at home using phrases such as "venomous nematodes" and "inveterate gallant". Quite an interesting, well-rounded female figure, one might think. And yet, in a series of deadening rhymes, Plath proceeds to deflate the pretentiousness of this archetypal female and her male companion, for it has made them indifferent to social claims more serious than those of mere educated, high society[20].

"Dialogue en Route", like a number of other Plath poems and stories, uses clothing metaphors to hint at the incongruity between public and private. In particular, in the poems which follow, Plath's personae dress up in (or undress) their garments to facilitate the exploration of an array of selves which could be deemed 'public' and 'private', 'male' and 'female', dress being "displayed for a gaze which is not constructed textually as male, but which rather is motivated by" a female "interest in the details of clothing" (Moseley 2002:43). I should mention that when I refer to clothing, I am referring both to actual clothing as a subject matter and to ideas of clothing as metaphor.

In the surrealistic opening scene of "The Bee Meeting", for example, the persona feels naked, and hence vulnerable, in her "sleeveless summery dress", the acquisition of clothes integrally tied to her sense of self-worth: "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" This state of undress is contrasted with the ominous "gloved and covered" people around her; their flesh is not vulnerable, as it is adequately clothed for protection from the bees. Concealment and shielding from bodily harm via wardrobe is, in this context, a preferential alternative to the liberating yet frightening feeling of female 'nakedness' or emotional and physical over-exposure (Lant 1993)[21]. This dichotomy bespeaks the western

cultural 'shame frontier' which, stemming from male/female and mind/body oppositions, problematises "nudity and exposure of the [female] body to all but intimate family members" (Craik 1994:12). In this regard, dress connotes a mode of female physiological and psychological self-control, as it is designed to cover the body in accordance with the notion that clothes create a properly embodied sense of self.

In "The Bee Meeting", the speaker's eventual surrendering of her "nude" or 'shameful' female individuality by donning the villagers' beekeeping attire of mask and overalls or "visors" and "cheesecloth" illustrates how, when it comes to attire, protection and conformity may be ideological contrivances in which mores and a person's so-called best interests are conveniently conflated. A version of such conformity is duplicated in the image of Plath as a Smith College freshman in 1950. She attempted to ingratiate herself with the conformist dicta of student life by adopting the accepted undergraduate costume of preppy shirts with button-down collars, Bermuda shorts and knee socks in order to play the role of mid-fifties college girl (Hayman 1991). Plath's journals suggest that she was aware of such role playing, and in her poems, "The Bee Meeting" being an excellent illustration, she sometimes uses Brechtian theatrical devices to accentuate the notion of artificiality or role-playing via wardrobe. The speaker observes: "The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands". This line points to a deliberate exposure of the pretence of the drama with regard to the contrived need for collective disguise over and above a vulnerable individuality.

The theory that clothing de-individualises its wearer is subverted to a certain degree in "Tulips", where the obligatory removal of clothes portends an 'undressing' of one's individuality. Two crucial aspects of the speaker's social identity – her "name" and her "day-clothes" – are relinquished and replaced by a hospital gown which, akin to the beekeeping uniform, signals her status as an anonymous hospital patient or statistic. This new identity of conformity ensures that the speaker is treated impersonally, and she is 'patient', passive, inarticulate, and helpless: "They have propped my head between the pillow and the / sheet-cuff", "My body is a pebble to them". For the female speaker, these character traits are exaggerated into a psychosocial 'illness' in the institutional matrix of the hospital setting, as even the nurses in their "white caps" are female replicants, each one similarly "the same"; undistinguished institutional servants who are barely distinguishable from one another. And yet, in the context of "Tulips", the negation of the weight of the experiential self through clothed nobody-ness is also a representation of the "pur[ity]" of non-being which Plath hoped to attain via an abandonment of her publicly-prescribed roles as wife and mother. The

speaker, self-stripped and effaced, drifts away from herself and into the welcome forgetfulness of an other.

In "Lady Lazarus", the removal of clothes carries different connotations. While in "Tulips" the removal of clothes is equated with the relinquishing of one's public identities, the former poem, in ways analogous to "The Bee Meeting", implies the ability of clothes to conceal the mystery or allure of one's identity as either a living being or an effigy. This allows Plath an excellent opportunity to engage with female identity, agency and clothing. In her winding sheets, the grave-cloth wrappings a far remove from stylish female glamour, Lady Lazarus is a bizarrely parodic female reconfiguration of the biblical Lazarus, and through her Plath mocks the cultural construct of 'femininity' as the ultimate packaging of female sexuality for the male consumer (Leonard 1992). (There is also more than a hint, here, of a monstrous femininity, femaleness as a 'Bride of Frankenstein' created by the self-serving interests of a male society.) Lady Lazarus' come-on or erotic undressing denotes an attempt to control her body (Craik 1994), and it is presented as a sardonic stripping away of ideology: there is "a very large charge, / For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood // Or a piece of my hair or my clothes". These relics of saints, moreover, clamoured for by the gullible spectators, also carry a criticism of confessional poetry as an assumed revelation of the self. The idea is that there is some ultimate unclothing of poetic device and personae in order to show the authentic, unmediated body of the poet's 'self' in her body of work. Both forms of stripping intersect with the theory of the hegemonic male gaze which has come to characterise the exhibitionary complex of consumerist society *and* of literary-critical discursive mastery over the textual object. The relics are kitsch souvenirs of a cheapened show in which the confessional "word" and "clothes" overlap. Such linkages illustrate how "*Ariel* situates itself as part of a culture in which self-revelation or self-expression has itself become a cliché" or a "big strip tease" (Britzolakis 2006:115).

Plath mocks the idea that the unclothed body of Lady Lazarus will be an exquisite "walking miracle", as the supposedly living body that is revealed and scrutinised has perished flesh and a macabre ugliness: "Do I terrify?– // The nose, the eye pits", "The sour breath", "I may be skin and bone". Consider this satire of female beauty in the light of a feature article entitled "She Turned Herself into a Beauty" (1954). This iconoclastic piece describes women's most superlative "achievements" as "weight loss, better grooming, and medical help for acne, a deformed nose, and a bent back" (Cuenca 2009:183). In Plath's day, as much as in our own, 'misshapen', stout female bodies were regarded as problems to be disguised or corrected, through clothing; canny dressing could hide a multitude of sins, and the proper

woman knew how to avail herself of the advice and guidance – the discipline, in effect – given by women's fashion magazines. Even more insidiously, a poem such as "Lady Lazarus" shows that Plath was alert to new developments in female beauty regimes, cosmetic surgery for women increasingly becoming a further discipline, along with eating disorders, in the approved regimen for managing women's appearance.

In her fearful derision of the unclothed woman's 'corpus', Plath could well have been thinking of her college days, where the cultivation of the female body was an important feature of the Smith College curriculum. Female students had to pass a swimming test and pose for a decent full-sized profile photograph in the nude if they wished to graduate (Hayman 1991). Notwithstanding those critics who have taken Plath to task for what they consider to be her misappropriation of Holocaust suffering as a metaphor for society's perverse attitudes to the female body, it is impossible for me not to liken these criteria to those which governed Nazi concentration camps; while the two contexts are of course not synonymous, they do both revolve around the spectacle of the naked body and eugenics – the idea of 'survival of the fittest' and the belief that only the best bodies are worth social investment. (I am also extrapolating the notion of the 'best bodies' beyond physical form to encompass a writer's 'body' of work as one that must measure up and impress if it is to last and be revered [Helle 2005].) In "Lady Lazarus", it is obvious that whichever body or identity emerges from beneath the title character's layers of falseness will be yet another fragile, scarred construct that cannot exist independently of the sociocultural parameters which shape Lady Lazarus in the form of "clothes" and "word[s]". She could strip to the bone, one suspects, and never quite meet the requisite standards; this, indeed, is Plath's point. The tensions addressed in the poem also played themselves out in Plath's life. Despite her strong urge to mask herself, she occasionally indulged her yearning to unmask or strip her 'self' bare: "God, it was good to let go, let the tight mask fall off, and the bewildered, chaotic fragments pour out" (Lant 1993:635). As Craik observes, for the woman, even nakedness is not; "the naked body is titivated or covered in accordance with social and cultural edicts" (1994:115).

Undressing and women's clothing are also sexualised in "Lesbos". Plath's speaker refers to the voice of her alternative female self as "my ear-ring" – an accessory which inflicts a masochistic form of violence on the female flesh even as it offers piercing pleasures. (The 'ear-ring' might also point to the uncanny projection of self through the technology enabled by the telephone; as shown in chapter three.) Michael O'Hanlon describes body decoration as an act of writing which constitutes "the visible exterior of an invisible interior"

(1983:332). In other words, the "ear-ring" as an extrinsic appendage of the female body highlights the masochistic psyches of women in their quest for beauty – a masochism that is, as mentioned in chapter two, enforced by patriarchy and women's magazines, both of which champion the pleasures to be had in subscribing to approved codes of female conduct such as beauty (Britzolakis 2002). Through advertisements, editorials and features, the women's magazine world goes so far as to endorse the assumption that clothes and cosmetics "'banish' unwanted lives" (Leonard 1992:73) and transform the female consumer into her best self. In "Lesbos", the housewife's fantasy to wear Conspicuously Outrageous (Lurie 1981) "tiger pants" and "have an affair" hints at her desire to 'wear' the skin of an animal – in effect, to 'become' a sexual animal who lives a rebellious, 'dangerous' life as a woman emancipated from the cage of a prosaic, feminised suburbia. This predatory liberation was habitually the prerogative of the male, and in assuming such a right Plath devises for her speaker a transgressive femaleness. That said, the flaunting of androgyny through attire was a common-enough element in women's glossies. As little treats, these publications regularly offered 1950s women "illicit pleasures" or "time out" from chaotic schedules (Craik 1994:55). In "Lesbos", the speaker's "tiger pants" signal a mode of rebellious youthful dress that implies the speaker's hunger to venture beyond the pale to female behaviours and experiences which are considered offensive to an adult public sphere with its well-fitting adult values. As discussed in chapter one, the "tiger pants" trash convention, exemplifying a visibly sexualised, 'improper' female libido which is aligned with the role of the seductive, fashionable glamour girl. The eternal youth and frivolity denoted by the predatory glamour girl image is at once the woman Plath endeavours to be, yet also mocks. And it is certainly worth more attention, in another study, that the female figures in "Lesbos" show Plath not only exploring aspects of her self, but perhaps countenancing lesbian identities.

Woman's assimilation of the qualities of a beast into her own identity is granted further attention in "Ariel", where the bodies of Plath's speaker and her bestial lover are 'sewn' together in animalistic erotic passion: "God's lioness, / How one we grow". Here, the amalgamation of two female bodily fabrics allegorises the oral culture of women's magazines in that it points to the "interwovenness of women's lives" (Shifrer 2001:334). Of course, becoming an animal in erotic passion is somewhat removed from the act of putting on clothes in order to immerse oneself in a bestial identity. It entails the external transformation of identity via clothing which provides a mirror for the deeper internal transformation of the 'self'. In "Ariel", Plath continues her eroticisation of fashion in relation to the 'corporeal'. As an example, consider her representation of the performative in the actions of the two women

protagonists whose "heels and knees!" "Pivot". This is a vigorous poetic language intended to capture the movement of the catwalk model, a curious form of embodiedness which seems at once feline and mechanical, as if the women were avatars or cyborgs of society's preferred forms of femaleness. The fashion model brings the clothes she is wearing to 'life', but only through the sublimation of self and personality in the service of garments and design.

Moreover, the body and clothing combine explicitly in the pun "heels", which implies both the heel as a body part and a high-heeled shoe, the two tightly conjoined in the female imagination. Plath seems to be implying that this phallic, fetishistic footwear appeals to the masochistic streak in women who, through images disseminated by popular periodicals such as *Mademoiselle*, are socialised into believing that a woman's beauty and pleasure in her appearance are necessarily premised on pain. As Craik (1994) indicates, endless labour and deferred pleasure are familiar associations of the modelling world of beauty and body maintenance. Together, "Ariel" and "Lesbos" provide poetic renditions of how Plath uses garments and accessories as metaphoric projections of her self-as-other consciousness or her erotic 'libidinal' selves in an attempt to evade the limitations which define her more conservative 'public' identities as wife and mother.

While Plath turns to the fashion industry to illustrate "the freedoms she sought through self-creation" (Hammer 2001:74), her relationship with clothing treads a fine line between the creative liberty of role playing or performativity and the banality and constriction of consumerist female roles sanctioned by patriarchy, prominent among them: college student, sexual object, wife, and mother (Bryant 1999). To put this only slightly differently: critics such as Trevor Millum (1975) and Craik (1994) argue that women's magazines in the 1950s offered their readers five primary roles, namely: wife, mother, hostess, narcissist, or mannequin. It is the last two that most concern me in the discussion that follows, where, following Wagner (1988), I consider how Plath pokes fun at the stipulation that women ought to emulate fashionable female models of beauty and style.

Women's fashion and a 'deadening' female consumerism coalesce most explicitly in the collection *Ariel* in images of 'movie star' mannequin figures dressed in fur. This luxury adornment or the 'wearing' of an animal's skin denotes, along metaphorical lines, a clothed bestial identity. Akin to "Lady Lazarus", the mannequins parade the identity of the 'big tease' female who is a rare, expensive commodity (Lurie 1981), and it is also important to understand that in the 1950s, fur coats "issued a strong sexual challenge to the spick and span gingham-clad domesticity of the moment" (McRobbie 1989:34). At the same time, the extravagant excess of fur seems to endorse the belief that women's "love of clothes,

cosmetics, jewellery, their obsession with style and fashion, reinforces the myth that we are narcissistic and materialistic" (Sawchuk 1987:64). In "The Munich Mannequins", the fetishistic title characters are bodies of what Alison Lurie (1981) calls Conspicuous Consumption and, when clothed, they are identical replicas: "Naked and bald in their furs, / Orange lollies on silver sticks". The mannequins conform to the manipulation and moulding of the body synonymous with modelling and its propagation of an 'ideal' female physique (Craik 1994). Moreover, fur was in the 1950s considered the epitome of fashionable refinement for women, and it was worn with a carelessly self-aware "emphasis on the un-natural and the artificial" (McRobbie 1989:42), showing how its wearer assumed the identity of a prized and pricey trophy analogous with the projected value of the exquisitely rare, beautiful self.

Of course, fur additionally provides the illusion that it conceals its wearer's predatory sexuality and murderous mentality. The title characters in "The Munich Mannequins" belong to a rapacious consuming class whose members have killed their individuality and the animals they are wearing in the pursuit of a fashionable yet barren 'perfection'. Their beauty is sterile; they "[u]nloos[e] their moons, month after month, to no purpose". Leonard raises an interesting related point in his discussion of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, where the central metaphor of "being encased in glass" evokes the "plate-glass windows of department stores", where female facsimiles strike a seductive "pose with such perfection that only a dead woman could hope to rival it" (1992:62). Craik also reflects on this link between the bodies of 'model', 'women' and clothes: "Commentators have noted the strangely eerie quality of clothes in exhibitions on mannequins rather than living bodies", suggesting that when "clothes have been on display too long, the fabrics 'die'" (1994:16). Compare this mortality with the 'energy' of actively worn clothes in a poem like "Ariel".

"The Munich Mannequins", as inanimate, stylishly perfect, commodified dummies, are "presumed to have no essential subjectivity, but only an assortment of assumed personalities that the advertised products make possible" (Leonard 1992:73). In essence, they have bought into the sterile and depthless consumerist role of the female as 'dead' sexual object whose wealth resides on a public appraisal based on beauty as the expense of time and money: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children". Similarly, Plath herself views her female body as a machine with herself peering out of a mask of confidence created through powder and perfume: "This is how it was. I dressed slowly, smoothing, perfuming, powdering ... this is I, I thought, the American virgin, dressed to seduce. I know I'm in for an evening of sexual pleasure" (2000a:13). This is such an unstable presentation of self.

Following from the ellipsis, for example: the deictic gesture is towards an "I" that is doubly asserted, and yet which, in the very need for such assertive emphasis, attests to the impossibility of achieving a singular, coherent identity. The "I" comes so close to realising euphoric wholeness, but cannot overcome the fact of separation. This separation is both the small, punctuating split of the merest comma ("I, I"), *and* the much larger grammatical-conceptual 'error' of self which ought to be expressed as "me, I", but over which even the most educated female mind could be expected to stumble, revealing her flawed self. Cavilling, perhaps? Stretching a point? Or perhaps not, when the strangely depersonalised whole of "the American virgin", as Plath styles herself, is so deliberately perfumed and powdered in the passage in the service of a seduction scene and a sexual pleasure which will intentionally render the speaker, and render her whole. How much, it seems, clothing is expected to cover. Plath the virginal? Plath playing the virgin? I wonder.

When I return to the poem "The Munich Mannequins", I am once again struck by how it shows the modern female as a victim of the seductive feminine beauty culture: the mannequin-women are "fully and finely accoutred, but they are stupidified, living in the squalor of their narcissism" (Shifrer 2001:339). As Leonard argues, while Plath understands that the beauty industry and its advertisements and giveaways are strategically targeted at women to transform them into "more reliable consumer[s]", on another level she "invites and participates in this process of commodification because it is such a relief to masquerade as a thing (a 'feminine woman') instead of enduring the ambivalence of uncommodified subjectivity" (1992:61). In this regard, consumerism pervades a woman's personality "until that 'personality' is nothing more than a package designed to catch the eye of the discerning masculine consumer" (Leonard 1992:61). Plath's 'fur poem' clearly projects and critiques her own consumer status or appetite for clothing in the form of the female-as-sexual-object, de-individualised and artificial. Effectively, in their quest for exceptional style, women become unexceptional mass-produced goods.

This inhibiting commercialism meets further unstable ground in "The Applicant", where Plath uses the humour inherent in counter-normative sexual and gender identity to destabilise stereotypes or disrupt the reader's schema in terms of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and men's and women's social roles denoted by clothing, literal or otherwise. Given that countless slogans in *Mademoiselle* magazines of the 1950s pledged to transform any woman into a real 'woman' through attire, the following advertising rhetoric is particularly apt: "Hollywood-Maxwell makes the most of you with the inch-adding glamour of Her Secret Whirlpool Bras. It's a matter of morale to have those curves that make such a

difference to your clothes" (Peck 1953:150). In the *Unabridged Journals*, Plath is clearly influenced by such rhetoric, claiming that any husband "is drawn to attractive women", and "all through life I would be subject to a physical, hence animal jealousy of other attractive women – always afraid that a shorter girl, one with better breasts, better feet, better hair than I will be the subject of his lust, or love" (2000b:38). How poignant this anxiety. The husband is yet a fantastical rather than a real figure, but already he occupies a central place in the poet's consciousness; he has already, in the scenario she has imagined, displaced her for another, better model. It is Plath's reference to "better breasts" – more than likely meaning bigger, gauging by the role models of the day – that is dealt with most explicitly in "The Applicant", a poem in which Plath tussles with the cultural focus on a draped, corporeal female beauty. Above all, the poem responds to the 'sexual sell' of 1950s women's magazines which advocated the importance of 'the look' of femininity, yet demanded that this beauty and sexuality be expressed through women's domestic roles or maternity (Craik 1994).

In "The Applicant", a variety of bodily disfigurements marks the applicant: "glass eye, false teeth", "crutch", "brace", "hook", "Rubber breasts", "rubber crotch" ... The list of prostheses is extensive, and so deviates from the able-bodied physical norm that it ironises ideal measures of human beauty and aesthetic proportion. The list, applied to a fe/male applicant, also parodies conventionalised heterosexual gender binaries which so insistently categorise men and women with reference to physiology. As Bryant argues, Plath plays off the highly regularised advice of 1950s marriage expert Paul Landis, instead presenting a "freakish image" of young men, and women, "on the marriage market" (1999:26), and indeed debunking the romanticised myth of marriage.

The applicant seems to be male, yet s/he wears disconcerting "[r]ubber breasts" and a "rubber crotch". Even for a man, it seems, the given body is sometimes judged wanting. The male applicant is part woman; the woman poet cross-dresses him with aspects of her own physiological identity in order to enable the repressed. In playful terms, this is a lovely re-staging of the perennial fashion question, "What to *wear*?", one addressed in predictable ways by the pages of consumer magazines: yes, she may wear the pants – although never to an interview – but he would not dream of dressing in something as laughable as a woman's frock. Evidently, Plath's ludic purposes also carry serious challenges. The insinuation is that the potential wife is a garment that the applicant will 'try on for size', but even beyond this, the destabilisation of fixed gender identity foregrounds Plath's refusal simply to assume the position that society determines for her. Instead, in her poetry she role-plays gender, trying on various possibilities: the regular guy, the high cultural priest, the abusive husband ... and, in

"The Applicant", she even slips from the binarisms of superordinate male/subordinate female into something more (un)comfortable: a curious transvestism which is intended, for the woman poet, to appear as a form of assumed androgyny that enables her to express her criticism of restrictive social mores.

The poem shows Plath experimenting wildly in relation to the wife figure. Notwithstanding the playful, childlike environment of the applicant – the speaker's intimated mother-fixation, for instance, as well as children playing dress-up, and a game of hide-and-go-seek (Greenberg and Klaver 2009) – the directive "Come here, sweetie, out of the closet" is suggestive of an ambiguous physiology and gender-bending identity. The applicant, "sweetie", is gender-complex, repressing a closeted homosexuality, transvestism and transsexualism. A reader is left uncertain. This image of cross-dressing presents an alternative performative act which, according to Butler, shows how "the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations" (1988:7). Through Plath's intersection of dress and the body, she also underlines, however, the artificiality of the transvestite's gender act.

While discussion of "The Applicant" in chapter two focused on a reductive male gaze and its capacity to commercialise and mutilate the female form, thereby reflecting society back to itself, this chapter undermines the male/female and man/woman binaries. In part, (many parts, evidently, from "glass eye" to "rubber crotch") the bizarrely 'rubbery', ever-pliable body of the sexual object as depicted in "The Applicant" attests to the endless commercialisation of sexuality of which Plath was on occasions critical. From a slightly different perspective, however, such pliability could be said to facilitate the poet's re-fabrication of gender through a performative non-conformity. Plath exposes the cultural contradictions in husband/wife and consumer/product relations and the façade of gender and sexual stereotypes. In "The Applicant", Plath "deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler 1999:176).

Let me turn, now, to another aspect of dress in Plath's poetry as it bears upon her aura as a celebrity poet. Take a couple of statements. One: Plath is "a star clothed in the glamour of suicide" (Clemons 1982:77). Two: myth "fits" the female "figure well, myth is draped around her: the artist drapes his model with myth. Her value is immortal" (Penman 1989:114). Plath. Myth. What forms of materialisation does this entail? Some kind of answer is offered by the simulation of beauty in the poem "Edge" where Plath's protagonist is a neoclassical female body whose outermost 'skin' intentionally represents the ethereally "perfected", statuesque state of death, which Plath presents as the "illusion of a Greek

necessity", "Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment". The protagonist's draped garment aligns her with the respectability associated with classical Greek women whose bodies were draped and covered in accordance with virtuous morality. Yet the frame of reference also breaches the classical, leaping into the contemporary: as Leonard points out, "by saying '*the* smile of accomplishment' rather than '*a* smile', Plath implies that the 'look' of a successful 'woman' is as consistent and mass-produced as a registered trademark" (1992:73).

The high ethical tone, classical virtues and Greek 'goddess' or Greek 'artefact' status projected by her "toga" and the "Flows" in its draped "scrolls" represent a heightened appearance-consciousness. This display is hence constructed "for the attention of a spectator invested in dress" and is not about the protagonist's body, the imagery thereby offering "a space for a pleasurable, non-voyeuristic female gaze" (Moseley 2002:42). In "Edge", the protagonist's death unites the "scrolls" of her poetry and those of her death robe as her ultimate VIP adornments. This attire is an element of the ironic impersonation described in chapter one, as it is counteracted by the woman's acts of suicide and infanticide. Plath evidently uses the illusory quality of clothing as a metamorphic device (Lim 1997) to hide the protagonist's crimes or prevent the leaking of her confessions. This concealment is abetted by the excess drapery of the "toga" which conceals the Conspicuous Waste (Lurie 1981) of dead children: "She has folded // Them back into her body". This action of folding in or reabsorbing her dead children might seem poignant, a self-realisation which is intended to fend off the horror of murderous loss; yet it also signals a self-interested reversal of the natural birth process redolent of the sterility of the stylised women in "The Munich Mannequins", where "the garden // Stiffens and odours bleed". (I have to say, too, that lines such as these imply a disconcerting squeamishness about the messiness of a female biology which insists on seeping and leaking, despite attempts to clothe it in propriety.)

In "Edge", it is wardrobe which sustains the notion of glamour as "false representation" (Brooks 1989:187) or the public chimera of 'wholeness' and 'perfection' and, in doing so, inhibits the exposure of 'private' confessions and the "inadequacies of the inner self" (Craik 1994:23). Western techniques of beautifying the body frequently project "an outer shell which disguises and hides the 'true' inner self", thereby detracting from individuality or the individual as a person (Craik 1994:22). As a plaster-perfect woman, the toga-clad protagonist of "Edge" is an object of obdurate permanency who 'kills off' her 'unfeminine' experiences and emotions in accordance with *Mademoiselle* magazine's routine recommendations (Leonard 1992). In this regard, Plath gives new meaning to Leonard's

proclamation that "[a]dvertisements invite women to 'discover the new you' by murdering some personalities and celebrating others through the use of cosmetics" (1992:73).

In several Plath poems, the celebrated civility and decorum associated with western fashion is offset by the pre-civilised behaviour conventionally attributed to non-western dress. While the former rests on the distinction between public (outer self) and private (inner self) and the internalisation of social disciplines (Craik 1994), non-western dress is traditionally emblematic of the opposite. Britzolakis affirms, for instance, that "the manufacture of 'the exotic' is seen as part and parcel of commodity culture, in which archetype and cliché become interchangeable" (2002:207). In "Kindness", however, Plath destabilises such dichotomies, presenting 'othered costuming' as a mode of culturally relevant dress. In the poem, clothing is a motif of artifice or constructedness, as the personified cliché "Dame Kindness" is a high-status, celebrity-type individual whose wearing of "blue and red jewels" makes her a figure of Vicarious Ostentation (Lurie 1981). She is satirically presented as having the quality of "smoke" and "mirrors" falsity, and the "smiles" in these mirrors accentuate her insincerity, as, characteristic of the *Ariel* collection; they are frequently 'worn' as two-faced expressions or affects.

Counter to this public smokescreen, the "desperate butterflies" on the speaker's disassembled kimono of "Japanese silks" exemplify her need for a rejuvenating emotional flight or freedom, which Dame Kindness thwarts by "picking up" the "pieces" or socially 'unacceptable' outburst of emotions that seem to lie in disarray. The fact that the speaker's "pieces" will be "pinned" or "anaesthetized" shows how Plath equates the insincerity of public benevolence and propriety with emotional 'numbness' or a lack of feeling. Illustrative of a play between revelation and concealment – ever foundational to western assumptions about exotic dress and the exotic female body – the speaker in the poem is obliged by the poet to 'step into' the sanctioned public role of a stoical Japanese woman who bows, as she is expected to, before kindness. Paradoxically, the "exotic, theatrical, and elusive substance of art" is "killed by the 'kindness'" of an othered femininity suggested by way of the speaker's traditional, bound kimono (Britzolakis 2002:132).

Clothing as the adoption of a foreign accent or "foreign tongue" (Lurie 1981:84) resurfaces in "The Bee Meeting", where Plath's speaker obligingly dons a "white straw Italian hat" so as to make herself "one of them". Despite this social integration rooted in the participants' mutual 'familiarity with conventionalised behaviour', it is the speaker's stylish flair, her consciousness of how "fashionable" she looks in the hat, which becomes a reminder of her lack of belonging. In effect, the beekeeping uniform that she dons to *conform* to her

new environment carries a dimension which marks her *foreignness* or outsider status and hence her death. "The Bee Meeting" reinforces Plath's apprehension that the 'trying on' of identities is never merely as simple as the trying on of clothes. While the latter provides a pathway towards a change of identity, it is a rather artificial one at best, as in order to be effective the external transformation of identity via clothing would need to be met with an equal inner transformation of consciousness. (It is worth mentioning that the poem coincides with Plath's relocation from the United States of America to England; it carries something of the tension she felt as an outsider who had to immerse herself in a culture where the class-based social representations of identity through wardrobe were very different from the [putatively] more democratic freedoms of her native country.)

The complications tied to foreign clothing are played out further in "Daddy", a poem which uses a subversion of the potentially liberating aspects of clothing to underscore the restriction imposed by clothing on identity. Plath's speaker, a 'prisoner of style' so to speak, is depicted as the foot inside the constraining, punishing "black" Nazi boot of her father's domination. This metaphor implies that she is wearing the shoe herself as victimiser, or is 'in' her sadistic father's identity. Such an identification via footwear or the wearing of an alien/ating identity demonstrates how, firstly, the menswear/womenswear speaker flirts with androgyny through accessories or evinces the "feminine potential of the male wardrobe" (McRobbie 1989:43). In other words, she uses sexual ambiguity as part of her 'style' "in ways which question prevailing definitions of male sexuality and sexual identity" (Mercer 1989:70). Secondly, the speaker's footwear shows how clothing has the negative capacity to mask, inhibit and stifle the permutations of one's identity: in the sadistic boot, the speaker is "Barely daring to breathe or Achoo". In keeping with Lurie's reference to clothing as a foreign tongue, this emphasis on the restrictive aspect of foreign clothing is reinforced by the speaker's description of how her "tongue stuck" in her "jaw" as a result of her involuntary adoption of the German 'tongue'.

As introduced in chapter one, another important element of clothing in Plath's poetry is the veil. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the veil connotes the interplay between the body and cloth through its propagation of the death/marriage link when the speaker refers to her beekeeping clothing as a "moon suit and funeral veil". This allusion to the customary styling of bride and groom might imply that the speaker seeks protection in a union – not merely metaphoric, as in the close coupling of clothing and self, but in actual marriage – in order to subvert the threat of an individuated existence that has been triggered by the release of the "dangerous" bees or repressed selves in the (Pandora's) box. And yet as suggested by the

phrases "moon suit" and "funeral veil", there is something alienating in the imagined marriage; part of the speaker's longing also entails grieving the probable death of herself in the form of her public veiling occasioned by the institution of marriage. As her letters and journals indicate, Plath herself certainly regarded this death/marriage cathection as partially definitive of her actual life with Ted Hughes.

The poem "Stings" further expands our understanding of Plath's keen awareness of the theatricality of fashion; that is, the ability of attire to project a certain role for its wearer. As I have already discussed, Plath used clothes to approximate different moods and publicly present whichever self-image she considered necessary. After her separation from boyfriend Dick Norton, for instance, and Mike Lotz's acceptance of her invitation to attend the junior prom, Plath celebrated the turn of events by masquerading as a "well-heeled[/healed], well-dressed" (Craik 1994:ix) sylvan goddess in a strapless silvery evening gown and silver stilettos (Hayman 1991). Here, chic fashion is seen as a means of making Plath's 'whole' life seem more pleasurable, instilling in her a bolstering sense of social superiority that is based on an expensive, glamorous look out of reach of the masses (McRobbie 1989). The "replacement of emotion with costume" in this context "shows the extent to which appearance is paramount" (Helal 2004:93). In contrast, just prior to her suicide, Plath's appearance was particularly unkempt. For example, on a visit to a male neighbour, she wore a bedraggled dressing gown and a number of scarves that exacerbated the appearance of a panic-stricken woman in the grip of a melancholic state of mind. The extent to which this was a deliberate look which refused the niceties of feminised beauty culture or a deeper, more fundamental break down, remains in question. Perhaps there is some form of answer in the poet's suicide. That said, Plath was certainly conscious of appearance as an analogue of mental state. Consider her treatment of nervous breakdown in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther's psychological instability triggers her neglect of her hygiene and once-stylish appearance. Similarly unkempt 'stagings of the scene' are replicated in "Stings".

Although they should be powerful appendages, for example, the queen bee's wings are portrayed as "torn shawls", tatty and lacking in functionality. In keeping with the derisive connotations of the shawl as an item of peasant female clothing (Lurie 1981), the speaker believes that if there is a queen in the hive, she must be "old", "Poor", "bare and unqueenly". There is also an element of cynicism in the shawl imagery, as it connotes the 'dressing down' of bohemianism, a style favoured by the rich "who can afford to play at looking poor" (McRobbie 1989:46). This dowdy image additionally resembles Plath's deliberately drab, hyper-English appearance in a number of photographs from the last year of her life which

show her as the quintessence of dull domestic duty (Newman 1970). However, the shawl in "Stings" also enables the speaker-as-queen-bee to hide under a deceptively dishevelled appearance, to cloak an identity different from the "winged, unmiraculous" being symbolised by the women in her socio-domestic circle. As an embodiment of a repressed role which Plath hoped to play in her actual life, the 'queen bee' figure underlines the capability of clothes to mask the existence and expression of a vital, imperial and "plush" concealed self. In "Stings", in keeping with the "shawl" and its connotations of advancing years, it is not the queen bee who is ageing physically. Rather, it is her façade of stupidity and ineptitude that is approaching death.

Linked to the shawl, scarves are important emblems in *Ariel* and communicate a range of expressive possibilities. In "Fever 103°", for example, the speaker refers to American dance legend "Isadora" Duncan, who performed her free-flowing, experimental choreography using scarves as expressive props. As you will recall, one such accessory caused her fatal death in a car accident, and in "Fever 103°" Plath writes, "One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel". This is the inevitable punishment for the speaker's supposed sexual freedoms and even promiscuity. Although indicative of the sexual liberty or fluidity of the speaker's socially 'unacceptable' whorish selves, the scarf is thus also a stifling device which may refuse (over my dead body) to be complicit in the speaker's enactment of the public virgin, disclosing instead her flawed female taint.

Another clothing item of significance in "Fever 103°" is the petticoat or underskirt. This is an intimate, concealed garment that shows how the manipulative and subversive sexual power of the female body 'rubs off' onto its clothes (Craik 1994). The speaker's socially 'shameful' selves are represented by the faded seductive powers of her multiple "old whore petticoats", which have come to connote a slatternly disposition, dramatically subverting older beliefs that layers of petticoats protect and even contain the model woman (Craik 1994). Underwear, after all, shows how the speaker simultaneously reveals and conceals or is simultaneously dressed and undressed, submitting to and rejecting public restraint on female sexual behaviour (Craik 1989). The 'shame frontier' associated with women's lingerie is an issue raised by Craik, who states that "[e]uphemisms such as underpinnings, unmentionables, indescribables and unwhisperables" were used, certainly in the 1950s, "to allude to the unnameable" (1994:119). In this regard, the petticoats in "Fever 103°" could be construed as metaphors for the intimacies expected of the confessional speaker or the physical correspondents of secret utterances (Helal 2004). The speaker's newfound public identity as a "pure acetylene / Virgin" signals a rebuke and discarding of

unviable "Discontinued Identities" (Banim and Guy 2001) based on an out-moded sexual paraphernalia that 'corsets' the body.

The notion that clothes have the facility to conceal sexual selves is echoed in "Poppies in October", a poem in which the speaker describes how a woman's blood "red heart" is powerful enough to "bloom" through the concealing garment of a "coat". As in "Poppies in July", Plath equates the red flowers with "skirts" which the "sun-clouds" of even copious petticoats "cannot manage"; the skirts are revealing, they are the daring attire of youth, sexual passion and *joie de vivre*. For Plath, red was a colour of dangerous vibrancy; after putting on red shoes and red silk stockings, she explains: "the color feels amazing – almost incandescent fire silk-sheathing my legs" (2000a:379). While "Poppies in October" seems to confirm the faculty of clothes to conceal, this capacity is challenged by the existence of the irrepressible, socially iconoclastic selves which, like bold poppies, bloom voluptuously.

Hair is another facet of the identity-changing art of clothing which Plath explores in *Ariel*. Long, loose hair – typically regarded as a sign of femininity and sexuality (Lurie 1981) – is implied in "Stings": "[f]or years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair", says the speaker. Here, her feminine locks, while suggestive of her concealed, erotic queen bee self, also exacerbate the restriction inherent in her role as housewife. In a figure of trapped fairytale translocated to the everyday, she is weighed down by the femaleness of her long hair; it is this hair which binds her to the expected female roles of her time and place. By contrast, Lady Lazarus rises "Out of the ash" with her "red hair" (meaning saturated with intense colour as well as with layers of intertexual meaning to be *read*.) This is an image which evokes the fiery, tempestuous and forceful personality of the redheaded woman who disavows prescribed notions of passive femininity. She is fire. She is phoenix. She is the powerful figure of ancient mythology. Correspondingly, "Lesbos" aligns loose, flowing locks with a sexual rebellion against domesticity: "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair", says the speaker, sardonically luring little mermaids and salacious sirens into the bathetic domestic context. That the long hair in some of these poems is fake – a wig donned by the speaker – aligns it with disguise and an ambiguous domesticity. The wigs, that is, while they are frequently associated with the emancipation of repressed or 'private' identities via the experimentation with different projected personae, also often possess a restrictive dimension in that they are associated with the female dimension of maintaining appearances. Long hair, of course, may also imply not sexual rapacity but a more psychologically unbound lack of order and control. On a visit to Plath's flat in 1962, when she was at the height of her personal woe as a harried single mother, her friend Alvarez, reflected on her bedraggled

appearance: "I had never seen her so strained". Her hair was loose and hung to her waist "like a tent, giving her pale face and gaunt figure a curiously desolate air" (Hayman 1991:174). This is the woman at her split wits' end. Mad mother? Abandoned wife? Poet established? Who is she, this Sylvia Plath, and where does she find herself?

Also underscoring Plath's ambiguous struggle with female identity is her use of sewing terminology in her poetry. (She had stitched small items as a girl, and when she became a mother she made – as mothers must – clothes for her children. Or, more exactly, there is a reference to Plath sewing for her daughter Frieda a single flannel nightdress from a pattern [Hayman 1991].) In "Tulips", for example, the alienated speaker describes her husband and child as having smiles which "catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks. // I have let things slip". Remember that Plath was conversant with fashion language, meaning that the phrase "catch onto my skin" may allude to the sewing technique of 'catching' or tacking garments together, Plath implying that the skin is itself a macabre fabric through which one can refashion identity. The painfully 'catching' "smiles" of the speaker's husband and child are constant reminders of her identities as wife and mother which are paradoxically snagged and held together even as the speaker attempts to discard these roles. It is only through forms of self-mutilation or piercing pain – 'catching' and "hooks" in her "skin" – that the speaker is able to feel 'herself'. This mutilated self, Plath seems to suggest, is the occluded equivalent of the "smooth and tanned 'natural' healthy body of 'consumer society'" which women are encouraged to present to the world (Leonard 1992:65). It points to the female masochism propagated by the *Ladies' Day* editorial environment of idyllic domesticity (Britzolakis 2002). Oddly enough, though, however painful the process, there is in "Tulips" also a sense in which Plath reworks the tedious, oppressive female labour of stitching into a shape that better fits the speaker's ragged emotional state *and* her felt desire for an integrated identity.

In "Ariel", the speaker is 'hooked' by her female lover's menstrual blood in an image which portrays their fluids and bodies or fabricated identities being 'sewn' together: "How one we grow". Again, as in "Tulips", Plath's sexualisation of sewing terminology shows how she transmutes the idea that the art of sewing is a stereotypical female pastime associated solely with the restrictions imposed on women by patriarchy – particularly with regard to their relegation to the 'private' domestic sphere. The speaker in "Ariel" is evidently a woman who finds in sewing a partial cutting free from gender-based stereotypes, and Plath's metaphors of cutting and stitching, along with that of cosmetic surgery, allow her in the poetry to remodel or restyle the spaces of female embodiment according to dramatic

inventive criteria instead of her merely assuming the gendered ideological wardrobe of 1950s women's magazines (Shifrer 2001).

The garments and accessories which Plath refers to in her verse clearly capture the tension in both her lived and her imagined experience as a woman poet. In October 1962, during her final months of life and in the throes of her *Ariel* compositions, Plath dismissed the women's magazine world. In response to its cheerfulness and frivolity, she remarked: "[l]et the *Ladies' Home Journal* blither about *those*" (1992:473). Yet the intricacies of Plath's struggle to find a shape, or shapes, for her writing in a 1950s world are such that one cannot afford to discount her immersion in a magazine culture in which women's market value – the packaging of their bodies as commodities – is the primary definition of their worth (Leonard 1992). While Plath attempts to write the image of woman out of the objectifying and erotic cultural script of patriarchy, she also demonstrates women's sinister 'bound togetherness' or their complicity in their own self-fashioning, "an incoherency of self-love and self-loathing", a love of one's skin and a desire to transcend it (Shifrer 2001:341). As Leonard similarly emphasises, "magazines such as *Mademoiselle* specify guidelines on how to masquerade as 'feminine'" and "Plath's attitude is that 'she can neither accept nor reject' these" (1992:64).

Plath uses the cultural discourses around clothes to experiment with various clothed or unclothed roles, playing with the norms, expectations and conventions of 'femininity' itself and sometimes through fashion acquiring "a sense of potency to act" in the very male, very public world (Moseley 2002:44). The *Ariel* poems' treatment of inherited binary patterns (academic/popular, public/private, male/female, liberation/constriction and individuality/conformity ...) as unstable and dynamic rather than set designates the fragmented or 'cut', non-fixed state of female identity. In Craik's words, much like the changeability of fashion itself, the adorned female body is "never secure or fixed" (1994:225). As a combination of identity and fragmentation, dress either glues "the false identity together on the surface" or lends "a theatrical and play-acting aspect to the hallucinatory experience of the contemporary world" (Wilson 1992:8). Evidence of both recurs in Plath's poetry. While her attention to details of clothing and fashion may mark her as 'a woman poet', this also shows her re-designing in words and images alternative shapes for women's imaginative worlds, and indeed developing models of confessional poetry whose significance lies, quite literally, in their *acts* of confession rather than in simple disclosure. It is such refashionings which make her work memorable and lasting – more than a mere suicidal fashion experiment. And, as in the Plath short story "Day of Success", the last thing that 'Sylvia Plath' wanted to be was "obsolete as last year's hemline".

CONCLUSION

Sylvia Plath took delight in playing her critics, and my analyses of the *Ariel* poems and other selected pieces demonstrate that Plath's conflicted creativity is both locked into and surpasses the platitudinous image of the mercurial, madwoman poet which a popular public and scholarly critics alike have impressed upon her by way of the 'Plath myth'. An issue women poets have struggled with for decades (Ostriker 1982), the *Ariel* collection acts as a theatre for the parading of multiple, discontinuous selves or is governed by a plurality of irreconcilable self-representations "confronting the reader with the rifts and discontinuities upon which narratives of selfhood", specifically 1950s *female* selfhood, are constructed (Britzolakis 2002:13). This pluralised notion of 'self', Kristeva's (1982) 'subject-in-process', rejects imposed models of femininity *and* embraces the gendered competencies around the female self in their many forms: celebrity, sexualised spectacle and spectating, voice and ventriloquism, and clothing.

The 'Plath myth' presents the reader with a "highly flexible star image" (Moseley 2002:38) irreducible to the common perception that fame swallows its subject completely. By shifting the focus from the person(a) to the poetry without attempting to negate the 'Plath myth', I have argued for the significance of the role Plath's public persona(e) plays in her popular and academic reception, as well as in her enthralling work as a woman poet whose feminine 'star' image complements and tussles with her masculine ambition to become a hyperreal *literary* celebrity. It is necessary that one (re)considers the nature of the 'Plath myth' in conjunction with its subject's enigmatic identity. Published in the popular magazine *Biography*, John Kehoe's essay "Young, Talented, and Doomed" calls Plath's voice "raging, raw, and insistent" and states that her final poems "thudded home like a wrecking ball in a velvet slipcover" (1999:90-1). Such rhetoric is accompanied by a photograph of a swim-suited, suntanned Plath – a combination which presents her as both a pinup and a freak – her miseries a side-show attraction that amalgamates the 'academic' and the 'popular'. As a literary celebrity, Plath occupies a contentiously in-between position: she is neither exclusively intellectual nor exclusively popular. It is, however, this spectacular indeterminacy or persistent unwillingness to be labelled which has made the 'IMAX' image of Plath and her (in)famous poetry so enticing and resilient for contemporary study.

In addition, although a selection of her work was published while she was still alive – *The Colossus* in 1960 and the semi-autobiographical *The Bell Jar* just prior to her death in 1963 – Plath's fame came posthumously. Many of the poems that had been rejected by

magazines prior to her suicide were hastily published a mere six days after her death. On 17 February 1963, Alvarez, poetry editor of the *Observer*, ran four poems which Plath had written in the final weeks of her life. *The New Yorker* published seven of Plath's poems in August, while the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *London Magazine* ran two and seven poems respectively in April of the same year (Wagner 2000). It is wholly unfortunate that Plath's timeless, dazzling eminence has been eclipsed by its erroneously-conceived link to her now histrionic 'gas chamber' suicide in a keen demonstration of the sadistic, perverse side of public acclaim. Certainly, Plath's "celebrity status [is] overdetermined by a culture that interpellates" her as a 'feminine' subject, and yet the *Ariel* poems evince her attempt to escape her "predetermined images in a culture obsessed with essentialist gender categories" (Helal 2004:82).

Unlike Bundtzen, I do not believe Plath's iconoclastic *Ariel* works to denote a resolution of the discord she experienced between "her art and her life" (1983:42). Rather, the poems are aesthetic masks behind which Plath can pretend or imagine various alternative selves in her ambivalent and unresolved attempt to write into being some sense of an integrated 'I'. Plath's poetry shows that she is a figure of complicated conjecture or possesses a "famously changeable personality" (Moses 2007:93): she remains a celebrated woman poet who yet claims outspoken forms of voice and status more often associated with male literary celebrity; she bridges the academic and the popular in ways which make the very categories suspect ... In effect, 'Sylvia Plath' is at once real and illusory, but neither monolithic nor monological. The messiness and over-imbrication of these labels underscores the idea that femaleness from the perspective of the woman poet *is* difficult to understand and live in (Greenberg and Klaver 2009), and that women's psychology is not tidy, but a complex, I would even say creative, site of dissonance.

The likes of Van Dyne accuse Plath of being unable to break free of "the prevailing construction of femininity", an argument which returns the critic to common perceptions of Plath's instability or the idea that the fragmentation of self suggested in her poems is nothing more than a sign of mental illness. Rather, by putting various types of femaleness forcefully into the public eye, Plath's poetry takes us beyond the mass-mediated *cliché* of "the Plath model of writing a couple of brilliant books and sticking one's head in an oven" (Greenberg and Klaver 2009:198). Plath's poems, then, belong as much to the mass-mediated space of contemporary American culture, society and politics, as to some agonised personal enclave of the troubled psyche.

The anomalies of the *Ariel* poems reflect the woman poet's massively tangled relation with cultural discourses in a variety of contexts. As a hybrid, Plath's writing treads "the boundaries of cultural difference with an extraordinary and almost transgressive ease" (Rose 1991:167), occupying both 'high' and 'low' culture, the 'academic' and the 'popular'. As Helle maintains, Plath stands defiantly 'in-between' research "performatively marked off as 'proper' for art and 'cultural practice' in the tower of the university library archive" and the wider cultural implications of popular discourses (2005:647). In both her life and texts, Plath's attempts to resist various cultural discourses – be they beauty or housewifery – are poignantly enhanced by her "powerful and disillusioned investments" in these very discourses (Britzolakis 2002:145). In this regard, a pivotal aspect of the appeal of Plath and her poetry lies in the fact that however hard we look, however deeply, it is difficult to see, exactly and precisely, what is going on. As Brain argues, the "more we try to establish the 'right' Plath text", the 'right' linguistic mask, "the more we find that it eludes us" (2007:19). By addressing contested strains of Plath criticism from Bryant to Rose to Helle (the list goes on), it is clear that we are left with Plath's slippery work as never quite fitting any single theoretical framework. (Forget the girl being found by her prince; there is no shoe that quite fits – though we ought not to assume then, that the fault lies with the foot.)

Further, a dispersed, de-aggregated understanding of 'Sylvia Plath' – one inflected by web sites, by academic scholarship, by new media applications, by advertising, as well as by longstanding traditions of lyric poetry – enables views of the writer's poetry that have been occluded by insistent emphases on 'Sylvia Plath' as a certified (sometimes certifiable) and coherently mythologised body. In particular, the 'body-in-pieces' or fragmentary remains of the 'Plath archive' (Rose 1991) facilitate more wide-ranging, fluid readings of Plath's work than were offered in the past, readings which are not circumscribed by a canonically preserved corpus (and corpse), but which cross literary and cultural genres, thereby granting credence to the dazzling indeterminacies of the work at hand and keeping the Plath 'body' alive. In addition, by dissociating ourselves from the attempt to purify or reconstitute Plath's dismembered body parts in supposedly genuine or authentic ways, we allow for the recompense of new insight into her work and ensure that her poetry remains continually open to re-animation and fresh interpretation[22]. As a cultural medium based on the interplay of public/private spaces and identities, for instance, the internet provides a digital or non-hermetic archivisation process which reformulates and popularises Plath's *oeuvre*, thereby making it accessible to a new generation of readers[23].

The archiving of Plath in both scholarship and popular contexts evinces the continuing appeal of – and challenges to – categories such as 'the confessional', 'self-revelation', and 'the troubled female psyche'. Specifically, the *Ariel* poems invite the contemporary reader to re-imagine the nature of 'self' and 'exposure', and in Rose's words, it "is the most confessional and intimate of poets who can show us most clearly that the personal is always self-invention and myth", the 'I' is a fiction, the personal is the ultimate persona (2003:23).

The *Ariel* poems are additionally revealing in that they intersect with the psychospiritualy death of the individual, particularly the *female* individual, in a postmodern televisual celebrity culture premised on consumerism, cosmetic surgery, sex and performance. Bryant has appropriately referred to Plath as a "contradictory signifier of our cultural fears" (2004:257), an icon in which the death of traditional cultural forms and of community are offset by the enticing quality of an IMAX existence which contradictorily provides the individual with a public voice and blogging clout akin to the *magnum opus* of the 'age of the author'. In this regard, *Ariel* denotes a troubled inquiry into the concept of female identity and the female psyche which travels far beyond Plath's literary achievements.

It is apparent that the mediations tied to her cultural allegiances are what have sustained such wide interest in Plath's work over the last four decades. For contemporary scholars in an age of cultural hybridity, Plath and her work remain subjects of ongoing and unremitting debate. As Helal declares, Plath's image "continues to be created, refashioned, and complicated in a way that makes her an especially intriguing figure in light of contemporary observations about the fluid nature of gender" and identity at large (2004:99). It is my hope that the inter-discursive approach I have adopted in my analysis of *Ariel* overcomes short-sighted tendencies to align the poetry with the either/or privileging of 'the literature' or 'the life'. As Helle rightly observes of this interface between creator and text, different "'other bodies' are being studied here, but each depends on a kind of archival research Plath scholars were unable to do a decade ago, research that distances itself from conventional biography and yet goes beyond the image of Plath's remains as merely phantasmagorical effects of her cultural 'haunting'" (2005:643). In the light of this observation, Plath's work is unquestionably not dormant or 'done and dusted', as many in both academic and popular circles are inclined to believe. In particular, those scholars who research primarily in the South African context would do well to heed the fact that current literary scholarship is not premised on margins and centres that are fixed; instead such undertakings are actively ephemeral in the sense that all texts are 'works in progress'. As a

corollary, endless new insight into seemingly familiar, *passé* literature can at any moment arise if we but remain open to the possibility. In other words, the provisionality shown in the work of so-called irrelevant, foreign figures like 'Sylvia Plath' ratifies the provisionality of critical discourse at large, and suggests that South African literary scholars should keep entering the wide world of scholarship rather than necessarily insisting on only the local in terms of current academic study.

An assessment of Plath's work offers a number of inroads into contemporary literary scholarship, especially that of the rapidly growing genre of women's poetry and, important in the South African context, the invigorated era of *performance* poetry. I would even speculate that a good number of local women poets have been influenced, in some ways, by the figure of Plath and the premises of the supposedly confessional. Consider, for example, the life and work of Ingrid Jonker, a poet who has in fact been called 'the South African Sylvia Plath'. In this regard, 'world' poets such as Plath have a legitimate purchase on a South African imagination and South African readerships.

My writing/righting of Plath's work should be considered a reminder that even the personal and the psychological are embedded in the sociocultural instead of being some pure function of a poet's idiosyncratic mind. As South African readers, we are quite accustomed to this type of deep contextualising of local writers, but my study also emphasises that this is one necessary aspect of understanding international writers. The contemporary scholar is encouraged by the challenging, intriguing and insistent presence of 'Sylvia Plath', a woman poet whose work is boldly shifting, elusive, and, perhaps most significantly, *relevant* to today's cultural context. Undoubtedly, we will remain spellbound with the *Ariel* poems as Plath's final death-defying acts and yes, perhaps also with that mythic Plath magic ...

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[1] This myth is derived, in part, from Ted Hughes' controversial editing and arrangement of *Ariel*, which deviates from Plath's original *Ariel* manuscript (the publication of which was pre-empted by her death) and immortalises the woman and her poetic vision as 'death and doom' driven (*vide* Wagner 1988).

[2] The basic premise of feminist psychoanalysis (compared with more sociological accounts of gender) is that the "unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity" (Rose 2005a:29). For Rose, "'[f]ailure' ... appears not only in the symptom, but also in dreams, in slips of the tongue and in forms of sexual pleasure, which are pushed to the sidelines of the norm. Feminism's affinity with psychoanalysis rests above all, I would argue, with this recognition that there is a resistance to identity" or an instability "which lies at the very heart of psychic life" (2005a:29).

[3] The intricacies of Plath debates are in the "stage of the world and of the mind" (Rose 2005b:230).

[4] In her discussion of 1950s icon Audrey Hepburn, Rachel Moseley refers to the "constitution and circulation" of Hepburn's image which is "understood as constructed from the sum of the information available on the star including film roles, stills, gossip, press and publicity, but also those aspects of a star's personal life available for public consumption" (2002:39). Take into account, for instance, the following critical texts on Plath which clearly revolve around her death: *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (Alvarez 1971), *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (Hayman 1991), *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Rose 1991).

[5] This image also draws attention to "the centrality of the camera's eye to changing forms of sociality that transformed the midcentury literary cocktail party into a televised photo op with 'star' authors as anchoring personalities" (Helle 2007:186).

[6] According to psychoanalytic theory, images of catastrophe, rather than giving access to the Real, act as a refuge or protective shield *against* the Real or actual deadlock – in the case of "Aftermath", the breakdown of the nuclear family unit (Bronfen 2001).

[7] Joanne Feit Diehl in fact states that Plath's "primary trope [is] the engendered body" (1990:136).

[8] The voyeurism associated with Plath's poetry can be extended to forms of 'guilty' educative pleasure and/or pain with regard to ways of seeing or viewing the work. As Klaver asks, discussing "girl culture's Plath obsession" (2009:182): "How can Plath be both one of the most popular poets in the United States and a constant subject for academic criticism, while at the same time be a figure 'serious' poets have been taught to look down upon?" (2009:180). And what if Plath *is* popular among young women looking for dramatic emotional or psychological contact points? There is evidently a curious stigma or taboo associated with loving Plath's poetry; almost a warning to young women: she was a 'mad' woman writer, 'mad' partly *because* she was a woman so obsessed with writing. The implication here is that women writing remains a transgressive function or something outside the delimited space society prefers.

[9] The image of the androgynous female was notably embodied in the 1950s by screen star Audrey Hepburn, whose gender ambiguity was offset by the sexy, voluptuous femaleness of Marilyn Monroe (Moseley 2002). This tension is patently explored by Plath in her poetic oscillations between femaleness as androgyny and sex-symbol.

[10] Plath and Hughes' initial, public encounter in 1956 was atypically marked by a violent, bestial mutual attraction along the trajectories of the so-called private urges of sadomasochism and vampirism: "he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hair band off, my lively red hairband scarf ... and my silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face" (2000a:212).

[11] Caitriona O'Reilly claims that "it is in her poetry ... that Plath gives full voice to her particular tragic vision" (2003:359). The word "full" is misleading given that Plath's 'voice' is frequently 'cut short', and the claim is anyway far too closely associated with a naïve assumption of authentic, inherent and coherent voice. O'Reilly's assertion is also limited by an insistence on the tragic as the primary voice of Plath's poetry.

[12] Pierson, for instance, declares that the thrown, hence disembodied voice "serves as a vehicle [or mouthpiece] for the expression of the ventriloquist's own thoughts or feelings (or an alter ego)" (2001).

[13] This distrust of mimetic skill as deceitful is an issue raised by Davis (2003) who speaks of the confusion between the locating of agency in relation to ventriloquism: spirit mediums versus fake or counterfeit mediums.

[14] In his article "The Three Voices of Poetry", T. S. Eliot states that the voices of poet, persona and speaker are not "mutually exclusive"; instead, "the voices are most often found together" (n. d.:42). By implication, if early Plath critics had heeded Eliot as an influential voice of early twentieth-century poetry, they might have been able to imagine multiple voicings in Plath's poems rather than some naive unmediated experiencing 'I'.

[15] This perverted visual memory in her adulthood was possibly influenced by Plath's traumatic childhood recollection of her father's gangrenous and subsequently amputated leg (Stevenson 1989).

[16] While there are inconsistencies in the critical material on Plath concerning her age at the time of her father's death, Otto Plath's death when Sylvia was about eight years old came to be seen by his daughter as an act of abandonment (Stevenson 1989).

[17] Plath's work "continues to reverberate through elegies by women" (Ramazani 1993:1154). Consider, for example, Adrienne Rich, who acknowledges Plath's influence. With regard to this line of voicing, Plath is a 'medium' or muse who 'sounds' through the figures of contemporary women's poetry.

[18] As earlier comments in the chapter suggest, moreover, Plath's interest in 'throwing a voice' was very apt for her day in that it is a technique commonly associated with advertisements where, akin to ventriloquism, there is a close identification between product and person based on various complex forms of fakery and authenticity.

[19] Note also that Plath was a visual artist who made collages, sketches and paintings, among other forms of art, although the first exhibition of her work was only in 2002 (Helle 2005). This aspect of Plath scholarship, exploring word, image, line and colour across interconnected visual-verbal fields of expression, remains in its infancy.

[20] The speaker declares: "They both watched the barometer sink / as the world swivelled round in its orbit / and thousands were born and dropped dead, / when, from the inane overhead / (too quick for the pair to absorb it), / came a gargantuan galactic wink".

[21] Note that the speaker describes herself as "nude", not naked. This term becomes an especially female emblem, attesting to the differences, for male and female writers, the strengths and vulnerabilities, respectively, which are associated with revealing themselves in confessional writing. As Lant (1993) explains, the men tend

to celebrate nakedness as a powerful force of agency, while the women writers are inclined to find themselves left shivering and exposed to forms of 'the gaze'.

[22] A large component of the appeal of the Plath canon lies in its indeterminacy or Plath's aversion to finality. Take, for instance, Plath's manuscripts, which cannot be construed as self-contained poems or finished products. They "put in doubt any notion of a finished object or a complete and self-contained poem" (Brain 2007:21) and challenge preferred assumptions about poetic order, collation, and individual poems as discrete entities. Tracy Brain similarly refers to Plath's "habit of composing in clusters and sequences; accepting the variability of written and recorded versions of poems" or "hypertextual editions of [her] work" (2007:34).

[23] Consider, for example, the existence of various cyber communities and YouTube videos which register the popular consumption or commodification of Plath's pre-packaged, rather ineffectually-deemed 'academic' or 'high' art.

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