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## **Ph.D. Thesis**

# **Immanence and Transcendence: Aesthetic Responses to "Madness" in Women's Literature from 1892**

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2003

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## **Abstract: Ph.D. Thesis**

### **Immanence and Transcendence: Aesthetic Responses to "Madness" in Women's Literature from 1892**

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This thesis will consider notions of immanence and transcendence and how these relate to the theme of madness in women's writing focusing in particular on the work of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. I have begun with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and finished with Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). There are also references to other leading female writers such as Katherine Mansfield, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing and Jeanette Winterson. My aesthetic responses are centred around how women writers find expression for subjectivity. The notion of an immanent self is inextricably linked to an experience of a self which inhabits a body whereas the transcendent self moves beyond embodiment. It is these states of being and the relationship between the experience of a fragmented and / or a dispersed self which I have investigated through fiction and non-fiction alongside an analysis of the writers' search for expression of these states.

Part One provides a theoretical critical framework which considers feminist writing about madness, the body and language with a focus on French feminist theory. I have considered "madness" from various perspectives: as a patriarchal construct, a result of oppression and the fabricated notions of femininity, and a form of rebellion. I have also investigated recent feminist theory regarding autobiography because in Part Two many readings of my readings of Woolf and Plath refer to autobiographical texts. I have analysed the relationship between fiction and autobiography and the form of expression Woolf and Plath employ to represent the experience of mental instability.

My final section considers the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, largely focusing on Patricia Waugh's essay "Postmodernism and Feminism" (1998), Donna Haraway's cyborg, and the grotesque in Angela Carter. The themes of relationality and communitarian values and how these relate to transcendent and / or immanent selves recur throughout my analyses in a sustained consideration of how a relationship between situated, embodied selves and fantastic selves can be established. Within the 'postmodern sublime' we can trace those tendencies towards the themes of transcendence and immanence which we encounter within the work of Woolf and Plath. Imaginative explorations of cybernetic and grotesque female bodies can also be read as sexualisations of the female subject in crisis.

## **Part One: Theoretical Frameworks**

## **The Immanent and Transcendent Female Subject**

Female subjectivity is inextricably linked to a relationship with the body. A sense of immanence, or being in the body, can be problematic given that women have been negatively defined through their bodies in patriarchal societies; a woman's role and her situatedness in the world is largely connected to her experience of a self which inhabits a biologically female body. A transcendent self would escape those narrow confines which contain and often constrict a life. Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and many other women writers have explored ways of expressing female experience both as an experience of being in the body and as selves who are free to roam beyond the skin.

Although I have investigated the theme of madness through the work of Woolf and Plath, I have been concerned not to offer pathological readings based on biographical knowledge of these two writers. My premise here is not based on psychoanalytic theory but on aesthetic readings of women's texts. For Woolf, the self can be described both an essential, interior core and as an entity which is not contained and can attach itself to exterior stimuli such as the rhythmic, strobing beams from a lighthouse. Woolf moves between these two positions throughout her work so that her special "moments of being" can often be read as embodied or disembodied experiences. For Plath, the urgency towards transcendence can be most clearly seen in her final poems where the subjects or speakers often escape the body which throughout Plath's work is often regarded as problematic. In this sense we can read Plath's work as being an exploration of what it is to be a fragmented being in the world which is a notably different project to Woolf's expression of a more dispersed self and the multiplicitous experience of female subjectivity.

These notions of multiplicity and fragmentation will be helpful to us as we consider women's "madness" and how it is expressed through autobiography and fiction as an

experience of being a split or a diffuse subject. As I began to pursue my interest in women's writing which expressed the experience of 'madness' I became particularly fascinated by fictionalisations (many in part autobiographical) of mental breakdown in women's texts. I was first interested to consider the following premises: that women's "madness" is a *construct*, designed to control women; a direct *result* of the insidious oppression which saturates Western ideology; and *an expression of rebellion*. As the project progressed I became more interested in the relationships between women and the body, women and language, women and fantasy, and how these might relate to female subjectivity more generally. What emerged most strikingly in my readings of Woolf and Plath was the extent to which aesthetic practice has been used by women to 'manage' or 'heal' those crises of subjectivity referred to as female madness.

## **Women and Madness**

Studies of the history of psychiatry in Britain and Europe from the seventeenth century, found in such comprehensive works as *The Anatomy of Madness* (1985: eds., Roy Porter et al.) show that the development of the treatment of mental illness was closely linked to social reform. In the nineteenth century, the emergence of the 'hysteric' and Freudian theories of sexuality placed women firmly at the centre of psychiatric pathologies. The 'nervous woman' in late Victorian society in Britain, for example, led to a synonymous encodement of 'women' and 'madness.' As Elaine Showalter points out the terms *woman* and *madness* were inextricably linked in the late Nineteenth Century. Madness is perceived as a "female malady" because it is considered to be "one of the wrongs of woman ... the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality" (Showalter: 1987, p.3). Showalter explains that from the seventeenth to the twentieth century records show that women have formed the majority of mental patients in asylums and as psychiatric outpatients (1).

The notion that madness is both a construct designed to control the population and a

manifestation of the deconstruction of societal modes of control is fully explored in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1967).

We have now got in the habit of perceiving in madness a fall into determinism where all forms of liberty are gradually suppressed; madness shows us nothing more than the natural constants of a determinism, with the sequences of its causes, and the discursive movement of its forms; for madness threatens modern man only with that return to the bleak world of beasts and things, to their fettered freedom. It is not on this horizon of *nature* that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognised madness, but against a background of *Unreason*; madness did not disclose a mechanism, but revealed a liberty raging in the monstrous forms of animality. We no longer understand unreason today, except in its epithetic form: the *Unreasonable*, a sign attached to conduct or speech, and betraying to the layman's eyes the presence of madness and all its pathological train; for us the unreasonable is only one of madness's modes of appearance. On the contrary, unreason, for classicism, had a nominal value; it constituted a kind of substantial function. It was in relation to unreason and to it alone that madness could be understood.  
Foucault: 1993, p.83.

Within Classical rationalism, Foucault explains, animality was not considered to be the natural state of man; the raging madman, therefore was not "tending toward a determinism," rather he risked being swallowed up in the "threatening space of an absolute freedom" (Foucault: 1993, p. 84).

As Elaine Showalter points out, Foucault's historical critique of the repressive institutional power did not explore the possibility that "the irrationality and difference the asylum silenced and confined is also the feminine" (Showalter: 1987, p.6 ). In *The Female Malady* (1987) Showalter is concerned to give a historical account of psychiatry from a feminist perspective and to expose the construction of madness as a specifically female problem. In her text madness is not romanticised because it is a painful result of determinist notions relating to femininity. Also, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness is inextricably linked to notions of gender (Showalter: 1993, p.5). As we shall see, within texts such as Ruskin's influential lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" (1985) and Freud's essay "Female Sexuality" (1931) 'reasonable' female behaviour is entirely determined by sexual function. The epistemological fabrications of Victorian ideology state that it is man's role to act, create, discover and progress. A woman is to be protected, confined, must be kept healthy, happy and educated only to the degree that she can be an adequate helpmeet, fulfilling her function as wife and mother. According to

Freud's essay women must accept their physical inferiority. The only way to deal with penis envy is to adjust to their social role, have a baby (preferably male) and so gain a substitute penis. Female neurosis is due to jealousy, a result of disappointment. If women reject their role in society they are unfeminine, abnormal, guilty, unreasonable. Normal development, therefore, is dependent on passivity and this smooths the ground for femininity.

Whilst many of Foucault's theories of the self have been found to be helpful to the cause of feminism in terms of human emancipation and autonomy, as Lois McNay points out in *Foucault and Feminism* (1992), the "asexual perspective" of his work is seen as problematic: "Foucault insists on analyzing the specific nature of the processes of embodiment at the heart of subjectivity and then fails to consider the effects upon the individual of one of the most important processes of subjectification: sexual difference" (McNay: 1992, p.195).

That women were defined, diagnosed and treated by a wholly male profession is an issue which will be raised and explored throughout our analysis of texts written by women who have suffered under the regimes of psychiatric and psycho-analytic practice. Early means innovated and instigated by psychiatry were not tools for helping women but for controlling them. Women were persuaded to find the cause for their unhappiness within themselves rather than to recognise how external forces were affecting their mental well-being. The psychologist saw his role as one which could change the person rather than society. A failure to conform to society's norms and expectations would result in treatment: forced inactivity, confinement, brain surgery, drugs and later shock therapy were administered in an attempt to maintain the status quo within patriarchal societies. Germaine Greer elaborated these points in *The Female Eunuch* (1970):

As far as the woman is concerned, psychiatry is an extraordinary confidence trick: the unsuspecting creature seeks aid because she feels unhappy, anxious and confused, and psychology persuades her to seek the cause in *herself*. The person is easier to change than the status quo which represents a higher value in the psychologists' optimistic philosophy. If all else fails largactil, shock treatment, hypnosis and other forms of 'therapy' will buttress the claim of society. Psychologists cannot fix the world so they fix women. Greer: 1970, p.90.

As Greer explains in her essay "Women and medicine" (General Practitioner, 8 January 1971) in the latter part of the Twentieth Century there was a move away from the asylum and treatment was brought closer to home. She begins:

It is assumed as a kind of rule of thumb among doctors and others, that women are particularly prone to psychosomatic disorders. Few doctors are liable to perpetuate the old nonsenses about greensickness and hysteria, yet a doctor faced with implacably psychosomatic symptoms in a female patient is still quite likely to suggest that she get married, live a normal life, have a baby and so on. Really, the GP is not to blame for the limitations of his approach. He has no option but to attempt to reconcile his female patients to the limitations of their existence. He cannot even spare the time to follow up with an examination of the whole family situation, or even to examine the aetiology of his patient's symptoms over an extended period.  
Greer: 1986, p.47.

The passive female came to regard the doctor as a father-surrogate and being ill allowed access to this figure: "being ill is without moral stigma - being unhappy is an admission of failure" (Greer: 1986, p.47). Greer suggests that women offered no resistance to the idea that they are weak and silly, and became reliant on medication to combat supposedly 'menstrual' related maladies. The result was that in the early nineteen-seventies "out of the two hundred and forty-six million prescriptions dispensed every year, nearly seventy million are for preparations acting on the nervous system, painkillers, tranquillizers and antidepressants, the largest single group in the total figure" (Greer: 1986, p.48). Married women, particularly housewives, between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four became the largest group of addicts on record and the ratio of women to men admitted to day hospitals was two to one. The treatment of "depressive psychoses or involuntary melancholia" was not considered adequate in asylums or psychiatric hospitals, therefore female distress was dealt with on an out-patient basis.

Women provided a valuable market and a vast amount of money was spent on advertising medicinal products. This advertising exploited the current negative female self-image, fed upon the compulsive/addictive behaviour of housewives, and thus perpetuated their dependence on the medical profession:



When a woman arrives in the surgery she comes from a world in which her insecurity and low self-image are ruthlessly exploited. The barrage of propaganda telling her that she is too fat is now equalled by the costliness of the plugs telling her that she is too smelly. Until mid-1966 the problem of vaginal odour did not exist. In 1969, £126,000 was spent in creating awareness of it, and in 1970 the figure had been doubled.

Greer: 1986, pp. 49-50.

Greer does not blame the doctor for prescribing drugs; they appear to be the only remedy available to him. However, she aims to change the notion that women need treatment in order to help them adjust to their situation:

if he were free of the prejudice that women are mystically prone as a sex to psychosomatic disturbance, and if he were less likely to take a conventional moralist line with women who are plainly 'maladjusted', he would at least not be contributing to the situation as it exists.

Greer: 1986, p.50.

Rather than reducing dependency, the situation is often perpetuated by medics who take pride in their authority. The treatment of hysterical symptoms results in physical and psychological dependency, it acts on the sufferer and not their situation: "It is a measure of the disintegration and confusion of our society that such problems so often end up on the doctors' cards: perhaps it is in the interests of doctors themselves to speed the coming of a new world" (Greer: 1986, p.50). Greer's revolutionary feminism was centred on a desire to raise consciousness in order to change the above situation:

Women are not maniacs or idiots, either by nature or by chance, but they do need help. That help cannot come out of a bottle, nor can it be supplied by the most patient and gentle doctor. It will have to come from the women themselves and a radical change in their situation and prospects.

Greer: 1986, p.48.

In the 1960's the formation of the British school of anti-psychiatry by such influential thinkers in the field as R.D. Laing was beginning to revolutionise the way that patients were treated, or not treated (2). The scientific practice of psychiatry was thus brought under scrutiny and Laing, among others, questioned the efficacy and the ethics of a technological rational control which treated the patient as an inert body which could be operated on, locked up, shocked and drugged. The institution of psychoanalysis was criticised by this movement for what it considered to be violent and unhelpful measures. Laing was concerned to unlock the

external doors of the asylum at the same time as the internal doors of the self. An expression of "madness", for Laing, was not necessarily something to be feared:

Psychiatry could be, and some psychiatrists are, on the side of transcendence, of genuine freedom, and of true human growth. But psychiatry can so easily be a technique of brainwashing, of inducing behaviour that is adjusted, by (preferably) non-injurious torture. In the best places, where straitjackets are abolished, doors are unlocked, leucotomies largely forgone, these can be replaced by more subtle lobotomies and tranquillizers that place the bars of Bedlam and the locked doors *inside* the patient. Thus I would wish to emphasise that our 'normal' 'adjusted' state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities.

Laing: 1990, p.12. [ Revised preface to *The Divided Self* ]

Despite the fact that Laing and Foucault were writing about madness at the same time, their approaches did not coincide and they did not collaborate. Whilst both were concerned to explore the "truth" of madness as a part of human experience, Foucault was concerned with self-improvement based on an externalised technology of the self, whereas Laing was more inclined towards an existential notion of the self as real and embodied and, to a certain extent, expressions of madness were explained as mystical insights into the 'true' nature of being, particularly in his work *The Divided Self* (1960). Showalter points out that Laing's case-studies of women suffering from schizophrenia often revealed madness as the result of a difficulty to adapt to their role in the home and society, a split in the mind caused by what she should be and what she actually was. Also, the manifestation of this mental illness was seen as a form of rebellion, in many cases the only means of expressing a definite rejection of the confining constructs of femininity. In this sense Laing's notion of an embodied and situated self was far more helpful for women and gave the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s some powerful ammunition in the fight against oppression in Western patriarchal cultures (Showalter: 1993, pp. 222-232) (3).

In terms of feminism, Foucault's work is limited because it does not give adequate guidelines for collective political action, clearly a specific necessity for women. Nevertheless, Foucault's philosophy can offer us many insights into feminine behaviour when we consider his

premise that the body is a locus of meaning whereon the cultural mores and societal modes of conduct are inscribed (the body as text). In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault explains that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries women's bodies were subjected to "a thorough medicalization" because of their usefulness and importance as childbearers. This "hysterization of women was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society" (Foucault: 1990, pp. 146-147). This strategy "formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex." The hysterization of women's bodies was a threefold process:

whereby the feminine body was analyzed - qualified and disqualified - as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biological-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children's education): the Mother, with her negative image of "nervous woman," constituted the most visible form of this hysterization.  
Foucault: 1990, p.104.

It seems that the recurring theme of madness in women's literature is often linked to women's uneasy relationship with language and the insistence on her biological functions which in turn dictate social function. Many of these women, such as Gilman, Woolf and Plath, write from first-hand experience. The female artist is in a nerve-wracking situation because she is moving beyond the prescribed territory of acceptable feminine action/function/behaviour. As Gilbert and Gubar explained in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), for women, literary creativity is at odds with their expected roles:

For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I AM" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself.  
Gilbert and Gubar: 1979, p.17.

Woolf's declaration that we must first kill the "Angel in the House" before we can write is a powerful answer to Victorian idealists such as Ruskin. In Woolf's essay "Professions for Women" (1931) she describes the patriarchal construct of the perfect woman:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all - I need not say it - she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty - her blushes, her great grace.

Woolf: 1979, p.59.

Despite Woolf's humour here, the nervous energy required in order to kill this phantom, an immaterial ideal of womanhood, and pursue a literary profession often lead women into an experience of madness (see again Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath). A deconstruction of the spectre of the ideal woman requires a massive output of psychic energy. The subversive action necessary to dissolve the ghostly and ghastly projections of diminutive images of womanhood threatens the individual with a loss of identity because we have to set about dismantling the very frameworks by which we have been formed.

As Theresa Brennan points out in her feminist reading of Freud's construction of femininity: "the fact that this action may entail sacrificing a secure identity will explain why a woman will remain attached to phantasies, and a disabling image" (Brennan: 1992, p.174). As we dissolve the phantom ego, boundaries break down, we sense a loss of control, and in many of the texts we find that this loss of self-identification is accompanied by hallucination, productions of doubles, wild fantasies, a return to the imaginary. Kristeva's semiotic babble replaces the rational discourse of the Symbolic. In this sense many texts explore the notion that madness is the result of resistance as well as compliance.

However, madness is also seen as a heightened awareness; Doris Lessing calls it "Knowing" in *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Dismantling structures, dismissing falsities, causes the fragmentation of a discrete constructed identity. The production of multiple identities is also a rejection of the notion, prescribed within male logic, that a normal human being is unified. *The Golden Notebook* traces the progression of a female writer, Anna Wulf, whose experience of the self is one of fragmentation. Anna's mental breakdown paradoxically

leads to a sense of wholeness which is signalled by her eventual ability to write in one notebook rather than in four separate ones. The split self of the female protagonist disintegrates and dissolves and only after this experience is Anna able to reform a sense of self. Lessing's representation of mental breakdown in this text seems to suggest that the experience of madness is necessary in order to undo the splitting of the subject in society and leads to a state of lucid revelation (Lessing: 1972, p.549). In the preface to the second edition Lessing explains that her characters achieve "unity" because: "They 'break down' into each other, into other people, break through the false patterns they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore themselves and each other, dissolve. [...] sometimes when people 'crack-up' it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and division" (Lessing: 1972, pp. 7 & 8).

### **The Hysteric: Reading *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)**

Foucault ends *Madness and Civilisation* with a declaration which cites madness as a force which disturbs world-order and brings that order under scrutiny: "[R]use and new triumph of madness: the world that thought to measure madness through psychology must justify itself before madness" (Foucault: 1993, p.289). The theme of madness in women's texts is often presented in such a way that the reader might be persuaded that madness is necessary in order to escape patriarchal constructions of femininity, that it is a powerful means of deconstruction. As Showalter explains, the terms hysterical and feminine were almost interchangeable. Hence, the notion of the female neurotic has become a social cliché. The fact that the term hysteric has its origins in the female body is well known. In the Oxford English Dictionary the definition gives us the Greek derivative, 'husterikos' (of the womb) and further explains that the connection is due to the fact that hysteria is thought to occur more frequently in women than in men.

My feminist responses to the term here are threefold. Firstly a woman is defined, and situated as mad, as other, as hysterical, in order to control and restrain her actions. The term hysteria, then, is born out of a male fear of otherness. Secondly, hysterical behaviour in women is a symptom of the unhappiness resulting from the patriarchal, confining strictures of the woman's role in society. Lastly, hysteria can be seen as a form of rebellion against those constructions of femininity which confine women. Many feminists have joined the debate to determine whether or not madness is an effective form of rebellion.

In "The Newly Born Woman" (1975) Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous present a case which argues that hysteria is an effective form of resistance and rebellion and that it serves to deconstruct patriarchal ideology which privileges reason over emotion. Referring to Freud's work on Dora, they claim that her rebellion, a hysterical refusal to speak, was a triumph because such behaviour "bursts the family into pieces" (4). Cixous claims:

Hysteria is necessarily an element that disturbs arrangements; wherever it is, it shakes up all those who want to install themselves, who want to install something that is going to work, to repeat it. It is very difficult to block out this type of person who doesn't leave you in peace, who wages permanent war against you.  
Eagleton: 1991, p.129.

Elaine Showalter, expresses her discomfort with this view. Showalter reads Dora's silence as only a momentary triumph and more as a manifestation of her lack of power. She encourages articulation within the dominant discourse:

The availability of a woman's movement, in which the 'protofeminism' of hysterical protest could be articulated and put to work, offered a potent alternative to the self-destructive and self-enclosed strategies of hysteria, and a genuine form of resistance to the patriarchal order. If we see the hysterical woman as one end of the spectrum of the female avant-garde struggling to redefine women's place in the social order, then we can also see feminism as the other end of the spectrum, the alternative to hysterical silence, and the determination to speak and act for women in the public world.  
Showalter: 1985, pp.160-161.

Others, like Phyllis Chesler, will not romanticise madness nor "confuse it with political or cultural revolution." For her the madwoman is not a figure of power. Madness is an expression of female powerlessness, a manifestation of an unsuccessful attempt to overcome that state:

"Most weeping, depressed women, most anxious and terrified women are neither about to seize the means of production and reproduction, nor are they any more creatively involved with problems of cosmic powerlessness, evil and love than the rest of the human race" (Chesler: 1974, pp.14 & 15.) Jane Ussher also sees problems in glorifying madness: "The view of madness as a protest may similarly detract from the campaign to provide effective political action for those in distress. It presents too naïve and romantic a view of the reality of madness" (Ussher: 1991, p.239). However, Ussher says that it is important for us to read accounts and listen to what people like Charlotte Perkins Gilman have to say, those who write from the centre of experience.

There are many references to the nineteenth-century cult of female invalidism and infantilisation. The nervous woman of the period had become yet another construct of femininity. Gilman was angry about this formation of female identity, a male invention, and she challenged women's compliance with such notions: "American men have bred a race of women weak enough to be handed about like invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend they are and enjoy it" (Ehrenreich and English in Golden (ed): 1992, p.93).

As we have noted already Ruskin's lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" (1865) outlines the distinctive functions of the sexes. Man's role is to progress in the public world but women are to be protected from this world, kept in private domain of the home, the walled garden, where she can fulfil her role as wife and mother. Ruskin advises men to keep their wives happy and healthy through careful education - their minds must be checked, refined, restrained. All subjects (except theology) must be taught so that she can understand her husband's world and sympathize with him. Women must be queens perfecting their roles within the royal estate of their kings' homes. If they grasp for knowledge, power or agency outside of the home they will lose their majesty and sovereignty. The ideal woman for Ruskin is a woman who is

continually at play in her peaceful walled garden, child at the breast, peaceful and tranquil as a child herself. Gilman bears poignant witness to the pain induced by such confinement. If the woman is unhappy it is a disgrace so her unhappiness is accompanied by guilt and shame. We can see a similar revolt in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) which can in some ways be read as a precursive text to *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892):

It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suggest; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or to laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh.  
Brontë, 1985: p.141. (5)

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be read from many perspectives. It is a Gothic horror, set in a haunted mansion house, a writing of the repressed or the uncanny, perhaps a rewriting of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). It is also a fictionalisation of Gilman's own psychological breakdown and a feminist polemic, a protest against female confinement. In each case it is an exercise in extended metaphor. The construction of femininity in the nineteenth-century was largely connected to the biology of women, their role as childbearers was the central issue, and out of this notion women were confined to the home. Gilman offers a critique of this epistemological fabrication and a feminist response which exposes the resulting mental trauma when such notions are enforced through her protagonist, the narrator, in her novel.

Michel Foucault explains that the bourgeois inactivity inflicted upon women led to the emergence of "the nervous woman". The nineteenth-century middle class woman was forced to idle away her life in useless activity and so was prone to nervous disorder. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* we have an account of the intense suffering which results from enforced enclosure, protection and tranquillity. When Gilman's narrator rejects the role of mother she is diagnosed



by her husband as suffering from a "temporary nervous disposition," "a slight hysterical tendency." This is dismissive of the gravity and possible long-term damage which is threatening the heroine; a permanent loss of self. However, as Gilman explains in her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935) her resistance was made all the more difficult because she was battling against an enemy who was kind and caring and in this text the husband is depicted as "very careful and loving" (Gilman: 1981, p.12) (6). Hence, the heroine feels ungrateful and guilty. When she does express her frustration through hysterical outbursts she is carried up to bed like a child who has had a tantrum: "'Bless her little heart,' he said with a big hug 'She shall be a sick as she pleases'" (p.24). This continual labelling of her as a "little girl" and the indirect address of "she" puts her at a safe and impersonal distance from the narrator's husband and places her in the position of a dependent child with no autonomy and no possibility of communicating with him as an equal. She cannot choose where to sleep, when to eat, who to see. She must rest and remain isolated while he works away from home. When the protagonist threatens mental illness, however, the husband becomes stern - she must be his darling and his comfort, she must think of the child and at this point the rest cure is brought fully into action.

In her autobiography Gilman explains exactly the treatment prescribed by Dr S. W.

Mitchell, the North American equivalent to Freud and Breuer:

Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after every meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.

Gilman: 1990, p.96.

Treatments devised by such practitioners as Weir Mitchell were meant to act as deterrents for deviant women. Certainly for Gilman the rest cure was nothing short of punitive torture (7).

Mitchell's philosophy was that women were like wild horses that needed breaking in order for them to be thoroughly domesticated. He also describes the hysteric as being a vampire who

sucks the life blood from her family. In some cases women were suffocated and beaten with wet towels; in other cases the idea was that total inactivity would lead to such intense levels of boredom that any activity would be preferable to none. Jane Ussher explains that this treatment bears close resemblance to the solitary confinement and sensory deprivation used on today's political prisoners. In *Women's Madness - Misogyny or Mental Illness* (1991) she explains that Mitchell's guiding philosophy was that the hysteric should be broken so that eventually she would become cowed and tamed. In Gilman's case this treatment very quickly led to a complete mental breakdown. The treatment of neurotic women dependent on male physicians included the following ingredients; isolation, immobility, prohibition of intellectual activity, overfeeding, massage, endless bed rest: Showalter explains in *A Literature of their Own* (1978) the effect of such treatment (8):

Besides forcing a woman to stifle the drives and emotions that had made her sick with frustration in the first place and depriving her of intellectual outlets for their expression, the rest cure was a sinister parody of idealized Victorian femininity: inertia, privatization, narcissism, dependency.  
Showalter: 1978, p.274.

Unable to read or write and unable to communicate with her keepers, Gilman's protagonist begins a struggle for psychological freedom which involves reading the pattern on the wallpaper and deliberate self-isolation in the old nursery with its barred windows. Once Gilman's heroine has established that there is a woman, or many women, behind the paper she is no longer afraid of the uncanny, eerie, haunting effect of the paper but curious and determined to help them to break free of the bars in the pattern - a symbol for the social constructions of femininity which have been pasted onto women. Therefore, it seems as though the narrator's most profound moments of madness are in fact the most enlightened moments of revelation about the pain of female confinement. Here is an active revolutionary.

However, this activity results in the breaking down of ego boundaries and the narrator increasingly identifies with/ becomes ensconced and entangled in the fantastic images she

thinks she is discovering. As she becomes obsessed with the pattern and her mental energies are diverted and devoted totally to solving the mystery of the pattern she descends into hallucination, both of sight and smell. Passivity may have a numbing and anaesthetic effect but resistance and struggle brings with it pain. If we fight to deconstruct the commonly accepted ideal model for womanhood then we risk losing all sense of identity because there may be nothing left once those socially constructed frameworks have been dismantled.

As the story opens the narrator sets up an immediate distinction between herself and her husband which may seem to uphold the commonly accepted notion that men are logical and women driven by their fantasies. When she suggests that the house is haunted, he laughs, "but one expects that in marriage," the narrator explains: "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (p.9). This distinction is an illustration of how within the narrator's marriage the notion that "women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind" (Showalter: 1987, pp.3-4). When the narrator later suggests that she may be sick in mind not in body John's fear is that the idea of mental illness will take hold. She must resist such notions firstly for his sake, secondly for the baby and lastly for her own sake. She must trust him: "[T]here is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy" (p.24).

The narrator's imagination becomes increasingly linked to the yellow wallpaper in the couple's bedroom. The wallpaper is presented as a metaphor for a woman's fantasies. It is:

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.  
It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide - plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.  
(p.13)

Not only is she forbidden to imagine, or to write, she is also not allowed the stimulating company of her friends. This isolation accounts for the narrator's increasing involvement with the paper which becomes personified:

This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern looks like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.  
(p.16)

The suggestion here of hanging brings us back to an earlier observation that the room may have been formerly a gymnasium because it has rings in the walls. There is also the suggestion that there have been former prisoners (9).

Contrary to John's disapproval the reader becomes aware that it is through the narrator's fantastic imaginings that she begins to see beyond the surface. The wallpaper gradually becomes a metaphor for an all-enveloping construction of femininity, an insidious and detailed cover-up which keeps womanhood hidden: "This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then" (p.18). The elusive nature of gender ideology renders it barely visible, difficult to discern and even more difficult to strip away.

The colour, as well as the pattern, of the paper is also particularly significant; it is "repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow" (p.13). It reminds her of "old foul, bad yellow things" (p.28). The smell also is insidious and personified:

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

[...]

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house - to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell.

(pp.28-29.)

The connection to the female body is obvious here but also, as Horner and Zlosnik point out

in *Landscapes of Desire* (1990), the colour yellow carried precise connotations in the eighteen-nineties in both England and America: "Connected with the avant -garde and the death of Victorianism, the colour yellow came to suggest the daring subversion of past values" (Horner and Slovesnik: 1990, p.39). The colour carries with it a metaphoric signification linked to the "subversive *fin de siècle* morality" (Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, p.39). The colour yellow gathered importance in the last decade of the nineteenth-century among Pre-Raphaelite artists as well as writers; yellow book covers signalled the emergence of "The Yellow Literature". However, Gilman subverts the notion that yellow literature was a forum wherein sick individuals sought notoriety. The yellow wallpaper is fearful "because it is an instrument of unsettling revelation" (Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, p.41). The narrator learns her own story and rather than upholding the notion of "art for art's sake." Gilman's feminist philosophy focused on woman's identity and sexuality alongside an exposure of the confining effects of gender constructs. Historically and contextually, this novel can be read in terms of an account of the emergence of a new breed of woman, a woman who would threaten her male counterpart due to "her demands for political, artistic and sexual fulfilment":

Gilman uses the delirious ramblings of her narrator to inscribe one crucial meaning within the wallpaper pattern: this is the basic insight that the social construction of gender can be a prison house for the growing woman.

Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, pp. 41-42.

In this sense the smell also becomes a metaphor for something uncontainable. Although fearful and perhaps unpleasant at first, the yellow scent is symbolic of escape: "The ubiquitous nature of this smell is rather like fog in that it can creep around any boundary, escape any enclosure. As such the smell is elusive, undefinable, uncontainable and leads the woman beyond the confining sense of self with which society has endowed her" (Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, p.42).

Gradually through Gilman's text a phantom begins to emerge: "I can see a strange,

provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (p.18). Unlike the phantom of Woolf's "Professions for women" this figure must be released rather than killed. It is the "silly and conspicuous front design" which must be destroyed. But first it needs to be read and understood by an act of will. Despite the fact that such a reading is maddening, the narrator becomes increasingly determined to "follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion." The pattern does not seem to fit any logical design, it is "not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alteration, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of" (p.20). By daylight there is no sequence in the "torturing" pattern, it is "a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (p.25). The pattern is debased, likened to terrifying delusions; it is silly, and without purpose:

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes - a kind of "debased Romanesque" with *delirium tremens* - go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity. (p.20)

At first, studying the horrific and grotesque wallpaper leads to confusion and exhaustion. Trying to master following the pattern is a dangerous occupation because: "just as you get well underway in following it, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples on you. It is like a bad dream" (p.25).

The narrator begins to perceive that the woman is "stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (p.22). This woman shakes the paper as if she is trying to get out but all this she must keep secret from John. While she pretends to sleep she wonders "whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately" (p.25). The outer pattern reminds her of fungus, a sprouting parasitic growth. Gradually the narrator begins to identify with the woman behind bars: "By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour" (p.26). Secretly she becomes increasingly excited to discover the truth of the pattern. To John and his sister, Jennie, she seems quieter and ironically John thinks she is "flourishing in spite of my

wallpaper" (p.28).

The front pattern moves because the woman shakes it but the woman cannot climb through without risking death. Images of hanging, or the suggestion of being strangled, account for the fact that "it has so many heads" (p.30). For Gilman, an acceptance of and imitation of the phantom of ideal femininity created by such thinkers as Ruskin and Freud would mean an annihilation of their own desires, ambitions, identity. The domestic hearth for these women is "death", and we can read the images of the wallpaper with their lolling heads and bulbous eyes as being a metaphor for those women who have been strangled by the female condition.

The narrator begins to creep and crawl around the room, her project is to get the top pattern off and try to help the woman get out: "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (p.32). They share a common cause but, like John, the pattern laughs at her. The paper "sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!" (p.34). Like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the narrator considers burning the house or jumping from the window but this would be improper; this action would be misconstrued. Finally, her triumphant statement recalls Brontë's Bertha once more, particularly as Jennie, her sister-in-law has become Jane: "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (p.36.) There is no longer enough pattern left to hold her.

But what do we make of this crawling figure, who is presumably covered in the paper and physically still enclosed, if not mentally? As I began to interrogate the ambiguous denouement in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I wondered: is the reader to consider that the female protagonist has descended into madness, the imaginary and semiotic, where only body and non-verbal language is possible, thus fulfilling the premises of the female as hysteric, silent,

child? As Susan Bordo points out in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) "these pathologies of female protest ... actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them" (Bordo: 1993, p.159). However, we also need to consider whether this position can be read as a kind of transcendent sanity, an escape from / a victory won over patriarchy and its discourses. Is the ending of the text a triumph or a defeat for the heroine?

Before John enters the room the narrator refers to him as "young man" (p.35), the authoritative tone here suggests that the little girl he has been addressing is now somehow his superior. On entering the room he is literally floored by the sight of his wife crawling round the room:

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!  
(p.36)

On the one hand John is rendered unconscious which would seem to be a victory for the narrator, after all fainting is usually regarded as a feminine action. On the other hand, his body still forms a kind of barrier over which she has to crawl. The narrator has been awakened to the subtextual meanings in the pattern of the wallpaper and the implications of this awakening will effect her relationship with house and home, but our final image is of a woman fitting her shoulder into the groove, still following the pattern, still covered in yellow smooches. Horner and Zlosnik agree that there are no easy answers: "Her continual circling represents the impasse which faces the woman reader: it is left to her to establish a better liaison between women's desires and the cultural construction of gender" (Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, p.44). The husband quite literally becomes a boundary which represents "the threshold of Victorian marriage which must be stepped over if woman is ever to attain a more satisfactory sense of 'self'" (Horner and Zslosnik: 1990, p.44).

We know that Gilman herself escaped the confining strictures of the woman's role and went



on to become a powerful voice in the public realm for women in America, but what do we make of the possible future for this fictional heroine in terms of autonomy and authorship? Is the hysterical figure hopeless and helpless or is she the embodiment of forceful and effective rebellion? Some critics argue that romanticising the figure of the madwoman is harmful to the feminist cause because it merely endorses and perpetuates the weak position of women in society. Other critics argue that the madwoman's power lies within her very refusal of reason, and reasonable discourse as the only acceptable means of socialization.

Is Gilman fulfilling this prescription for female behaviour by allowing her protagonist to descend into madness or is she exposing it? Whilst the narrator's final body language may look like a madness, Gilbert and Gubar read the narrator's identification with the double behind the pattern of the paper as a necessary step towards authorship (Gilbert and Gubar: 1979, pp. 89-92). However, Pearce and Mills suggest that this identification is a misrecognition; the narrator's body language suggests that she has allowed herself to become the text written by a male dominated profession (Mills, Pearce et al: 1989, pp. 209-219) (10).

Certainly Gilman's purpose is to expose the debilitating effect of the ideologies of femininity and prescribed feminine behaviour, to uncover the problematic positioning of women in terms of their role of the domestic captive slave and the ensuing problems for the female artist if she is to reject this role as outlined by Virginia Woolf in "Professions for Women." She may kill the Angel in the House but she will still find herself dashed against the rocks of patriarchal ideology, she will still have to crawl over the powerful and indefinable obstacles in her path. Woolf explains that in her own writing "telling the truth about [her] own experiences as a body" she has not solved this problem:

Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against.  
Woolf: 1979, p.62.

I would argue that the phantom of the female hysteric is highly significant within feminist discourses, firstly in terms of its historical construction, given that the theory of the hysterical woman was largely constructed in order to contain female sexuality. Freud's theories, for example, give us ample evidence of the notion that women, left to their own devices, are naturally promiscuous and uncontrollable. His theories of female neurosis are constantly linked to pre-marital or extra-marital sex and masturbation. Later this figure of the hysterical woman was adopted by feminists such as Cixous as a figure of revolt but even she admits that this is a dangerous enterprise. In "Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), she talks about women's separation from language and the body. If we speak, we have to face the fear of being thought of as mad and therefore risk further marginalisation and incarceration (Cixous: 1976, pp. 875-893). This fear becomes a formidable deterrent for women. Germaine Greer suggests that in order to overcome the debilitating and deforming infantilisation of women we may have to accept that marginalisation as "outcasts, eccentrics, perverts" is a necessity for those who would rebel: "The fear of liberty is strong in us, but the fear itself must be understood to be one of the factors inbuilt in the endurance of the status-quo" (Greer: 1970, p.327). What might appear to the world as madness, a deformity of the norm, is for such revolutionaries as Greer a necessary course of action, rather than a passive embodiment of defined feminine behaviour. Greer gives us the following exhortation:

Ultimately, the greatest service a woman can do her community is to be happy; the degree of revolt and irresponsibility which she must manifest to acquire happiness is the only sure indication of the way things must change if there is to be any point in continuing to be a woman at all.  
Greer: 1970, p. 282.

Ann Oakley's essay "Beyond the Yellow Wallpaper" in *Essays on Women, Medicine and Health* (1993) recognises the importance of writing fact as fiction. She reads the text as an account of both "an escape into madness and a discovery of sanity" (Oakley: 1993, p.7). Oakley sees the story as an important fictionalisation of lived experience because:

it illustrates the historical and cross-cultural continuity marking the unsolved problems of women and health. It also highlights three of the most central of these - those relating to production, reproduction and the medicalization. in the form of mental illness. of the psychological costs of women's situation. Oakley: 1993, p.7.

She argues that women's health is dependent on productivity and that Gilman's story is an exploration into women's problematic relationship to reproduction, in terms of childbearing and authorship. Telling the truth about one's experiences plays, Oakley insists, a necessary role in sustaining women's health. A condemnation of "the infantilization of women" is a political imperative:

An isolated, unhappy child is not a political threat to anyone. But the political energy of a socially involved adult prepared to accept conflict and contradiction as a part of life is, on the other hand, enormous. [...]  
In the end, everyone has a stake in moving towards a more humane society where health and illness are not split off from the rest of experience, in which bodies are seen as connected to the environment, and minds and emotions are understood to shape the way in which bodies function; everyone also has a stake in appreciating the limits of science, and in understanding the new technologies of our brave new world. What we want *is* a brave new world, not a defunct, dispirited and depressing old one. What we want is a world in which women who ask for change are taken seriously.  
Oakley: 1993, p.17 & 18.

It is clear that Gilman's intention when writing this novel was to encourage women to be productive rather than to engage in a therapeutic personal account which might only bring herself psychological and emotional satisfaction. Gilman wanted to bring about change. In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* Gilman tells us that whilst she did indeed suffer a severe nervous breakdown, the hallucinations in *The Yellow Wallpaper* are fictitious. Therefore, we could read her metaphorical language as being directly linked to some political purpose. Anne Lane's introduction to Gilman's autobiography explains that the novel was not intended to be pure autobiography. Rather than an exercise in introspection, the novel was a call to action and engagement. Gilman herself explains in "Why I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (1913) that she had a specific social and political purpose. She sent a copy of the novel to Weir Mitchell and although he did not acknowledge it, she discovered later that he did admit that after having read her account of the effect of the rest cure on Gilman he had altered his treatment. This success led her to claim in her autobiography that she had "not lived in vain"

(Gilman: 1935, p.121).

We can read this text as a feminist polemic which exposes the links between women, madness and language alongside a highly structured aesthetic creation, an exercise in extended metaphor. My own reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been that the body language of the hysteric silences the doctor, her body becomes a tool of resistance. Finally, it is the narrator's husband who loses control: the logical tone of the narrator's final words, the dry, controlled ascerbic humour of the denouement re-iterates the suggestion that Gilman, the implied author, is addressing the notion that behaviour which might appear as madness is in fact representative of a transcendence of societal constructs. We will return to this discussion in our readings of Woolf and Plath but let us now consider in more depth one of the main causes for women's sense of the self as fragmented: the relationship with her body.

## **Women and the Body**

In Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1973) the narrator tells us:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulder's like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die.

Atwood: 1979, p.70.

Women's problematic relationship with the body has been well documented by feminists for many years, not least in women's fiction of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Atwood has explored this theme of women's fragmented relationship to their bodies in many of her texts. In her dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), women are entirely determined by their bodies. The Handmaids are a protected species whose only function is to produce children in a society where fertility has become a rarity. The confinement and rape which Offred suffers in the Gileadean regime results in a feeling of detachment and alienation from her body.

In her earlier novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood presents us with a female protagonist

who is perceived by her boyfriend to be displaying disturbing manifestations of irresponsibility due to an unconscious desire to revolt against her femininity. Indeed Marian's instinctive reaction to her engagement is to hide herself under a bed and run off into the night after a supposedly civilised evening with friends. These outward bodily reactions are then internalised as Marian develops anorexia. Shortly after her betrothal she begins to think of herself as a consumable commodity which is reflected in the way that she thinks of her body as a piece of flesh. Her initial reaction is to refuse to eat meat, thus distancing herself from the cannibalising impulse which she recognises in her partner, Peter. As Patricia Waugh points out, this eating disorder not only reflects the resistant bodily symptom in terms of an internalised rage at the female condition but also a refusal to silence this rage:

Marian, in fact, in adopting what is essentially the parodic strategy of the anorectic, refuses silence and uses her body to articulate a caricature of patriarchal culture's image of femininity which involves both rejection and subversion of its requirements.  
Waugh: 1989, p. 183.

It is only after attracting Peter's bewilderment and rage by leaving a formal party where she was supposed to have been presented as his newly won prize, that Marian is able to communicate her refusal to accept self-sacrifice as a way of life. The anorectic heroine bakes a cake in the shape of a woman which she offers to her male partner as a substitute for herself when she breaks off her engagement and refuses to be his object. When he leaves, silenced and afraid of this 'mad' behaviour, she begins to eat again:

"You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork," she added somewhat prosaically.

Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She wasn't smiling.

His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he didn't find her silly.

When he had gone - and he went quite rapidly, they didn't have much of a conversation after all, he seemed embarrassed and eager to leave and even refused a cup of tea - she stood looking down at the figure. So Peter hadn't devoured it after all. As a symbol it had definitely failed. It looked up at her with its silvery eyes, enigmatic, mocking, succulent.

Suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry. The cake was after all only cake. She picked up the platter, carried it to the kitchen table and located a fork. "I'll start with the feet," she decided. [...] The woman lay there, still smiling glassily, her legs gone. "Nonsense," she said. "It's only a cake." She plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head.

Atwood: 1982, p. 273.

The humorous and seemingly triumphant denouement here is reminiscent in tone of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The male protagonist is once again silenced by what would appear to him an act of profound insanity but has been presented to the reader as a logical and effective act of resistance. Waugh argues that although this text does not offer much hope in terms of "radical social change," it does, as so many of Atwood's texts, emphasise that in order for women to change they must "recognise the relationship between the female body and the construction of femininity." (Waugh: 1989, p.186) The boundary between resistance and collusion is too often diffuse.

As Susan Bordo illustrates in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) through her analysis of current representations of the female body in popular culture and her investigation of eating disorders still prevalent among young women in Western societies, women's relationship with the body was no less problematic in the nineteen-nineties, nor do I see any evidence of improvement in the Twenty-First Century. The modern woman's preoccupation with her appearance suggests a collusion with the forces which sustain oppression; bodies, therefore, symbolize and reproduce gender. Bordo traces the anorectic's self-inflicted brutality towards the female body to a sense of betrayal; the hierarchical Cartesian split between mind and body and woman's situatedness as passive body rather than active spirit separates her from the more valued counterpart. If the body is constructed as something separate from the true self then it must be inferior. If the body is inferior then so is woman (since she is defined through the body) and therefore she cannot take an active part in the pursuit of knowledge or spiritual enlightenment. Her reaction leads to a desire to transcend the body which betrays and is often manifested as a punishment of that femaleness which has excluded her from the dominant sphere of worldly engagement. Even starvation can seem a kind of mastery over that which is lacking, dysfunctional, limiting (11).

Naomi Wolf's groundbreaking book *The Beauty Myth* (1991) points to a third wave of

feminism which must address women's problematic response to her physical appearance.

Whilst first and second wave feminism was largely concerned with women's domestic role and her position in the private and public realm of society, women of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Centuries need to negotiate freedom from the myths which relate to female beauty. Wolf links women's self-surveillance with that practised in modern mental institutions and used against political prisoners; surveillance which is intended to strip an individual of privacy, therefore dignity, and breaks down their will to resist. Women watch themselves because they know they are being watched; they want to see what others see. This surveillance, Wolf suggests, gives us an insight into the motivating principles behind the beauty myth:

Female thinness and youth are not in themselves next to godliness in this culture. Society really doesn't care about women's appearance per se. What genuinely matters is that women remain willing to let others tell them what they can and cannot have. Women are watched, in other words, not to make sure that they will "be good," but to make sure that they will know they are being watched.  
Wolf: 1991, p.99.

Contrary to the body's natural instinct to avoid pain, Wolf points out that in the modern "Surgical Age" the desire for beauty acts as an anaesthetic which leads women to undergo technological torture. Survival depends on keeping "ourselves from knowing what we feel;" sensation must be cauterised (Wolf: 1991, p.249). Therefore, beauty demands a psychological cost: "The more we suffer, the more psychological resistance there will be to reopening the mental channels we had to block" (Wolf: 1991, p.249). Wolf relates this cauterisation to the electric shock treatment carried out to control women from the Victorian age: electroshock therapy is used typically on women asylum patients, and bears a strong resemblance to the death-and-rebirth ceremonial of cosmetic surgery (12).

Wolf admonishes those who would criticise women for their desperate attempts to hold onto beauty in the inevitable face of the ageing process and points out the distinction between the effect of ageing on women as compared to the effect on men:

Women's desperation for beauty is derided as narcissism; but women are desperate to hold on to a sexual center that no one threatens to take away from men, who keep sexual identity in spite of physical imperfections and age. Men do not hear in the same way the message that time is running out, and that they will never again be stroked and admired and gratified. Let a man imagine himself under the threat before he calls a woman narcissistic. Fighting for "beauty," many of us understandably believe we are fighting for our lives, for life warmed by sexual love.

With the threat of lost love comes the threat of invisibility. Extreme age shows the essence of the myth's inequality: the world is run by old men; but old women are erased from the culture. A banned or ostracized person becomes a nonperson.

Wolf: 1991, p.259.

Women undergo painful surgical processes, such as face lifts, in order to avoid vanishing and Wolf likens this modern scientific control to that practised in order to govern wayward female behaviour in the past, where lobotomy was the answer to unrestrained female passions (13).

Now, even in the face of death, our bodies are governed by the knife, liposuction and staples, so that we can fit into society's norms for acceptable feminine bodies. In this way we wear our culture on our bodies. Wolf also notes that "women are the drugged sex." She refers not only to tranquillizers but also to slimming pills. It is disappointing to learn that twenty years after *The Female Eunuch*, women in Great Britain, The United States and Canada are still "the main subjects of electroshock treatment, psychosurgery, and psychotropic drugs" (Wolf: 1991, p.268). The motive is to produce the perfect woman: "The new wave of cosmetically directed mood enhancers may solve the problem of women once and for all, as we dose ourselves into a state of perpetual cheerfulness, deference, passivity and chronically sedated slimness" (Wolf: 1991, p.269).

What can we do to combat this insistence on perpetual beauty? I recently co-hosted a Sixth Form debate where the participants had chosen for their topic the proposition: "This House would rather be beautiful than clever." The eighteen-year old girls argued their case passionately; women who are beautiful get on in life, they are more popular, they attract more attention, they are taken *more seriously* than clever women by the majority of the population. Whilst their arguments were at times slippery, what was painfully clear is that in 2002 A.D. young (and clever) girls are still duped by the beauty myth, are still searching for acceptance



and recognition through an objectification of their bodies. They were talking from experience; experiences which had made them doubt the value of a good brain, a solid education and which had led them to believe that confidence and self-esteem are inextricably connected to how others react to their physical appearance.

The effect of culture can be read on our bodies whose surfaces reflect the norms of one's particular society. Through the cultivation of our bodies, our habitual activity, the formation of our inner and outer selves through expression and concealment, we make of ourselves a map of the cultural norms and expectations of our society. Thus the body becomes a text. By allowing those norms to be inscribed and played out on what Foucault terms our "docile bodies" we also repeat and reinforce those very ideologies which shape us and inhibit our bodily movements. We are not only normalized under the gaze and surveillance of society, but the body which embodies the society within which it is situated also serves to normalize those other bodies within our gaze. Foucault's writing about the body, in his later work particularly, is liberating for those who, having recognized the operation of this power, move into a condition of self-regulating autonomy and self-determination. In *Technologies of the Self* (1988) (Gk *Tekhne* - art) Foucault seems to come closer to Nietzsche's theories of the subject who makes of his/her life a work of art, continually crafting and authoring the self as an object of aesthetic production (14). However, Foucault's work on knowledge and power is characterized by a deep pessimism which lays the stress on resistance and exposure rather than transformation. Feminist writers, such as Nancy Harstock, would criticise Foucault's work because it does not envision a "struggle for power, working locally and regionally" (Harstock in Nicholson: 1990, p.165) (15). Bordo's premise is also that "postmodern culture, poststructuralist thought, and some aspects of contemporary feminism" are "embodying fantasies of transcendence of the materiality and historicity of the body, its situatedness in space and time, and its gender" (Bordo, 1993:15).

Judith Butler upholds the view of gender as a cultural construct. In *Gender Trouble* (1990)

Butler argues that gender necessitates performance. Hence, to be a "woman" one has to act out the narratives that exist within a gendered organization of society. If gender acts are performed subversively, however, then the divide between Self and Other can be dissolved through political action. An emphasis on the body's unnatural representations therefore calls attention to women's political status due to the signs of gender. Butler marks the distinction between sex and gender and asks: "how are we to find the body that pre-exists its cultural interpretation?" Butler claims that the body is a "politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (Butler: 1990, p.7). A pre-cultural notion of a sexed body is therefore a mythification: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler: 1990, p.25).

Seyla Benhabib is suspicious of Butler's Nietzschean performativity and asks how we can transform those performances if there is no self beyond them:

If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and only let it rise if one can have a say in the production of the play itself? Isn't this what the struggle over gender is all about? Surely we can criticize the "metaphysical presuppositions of identity politics" and challenge the supremacy of heterosexist positions in the women's movement. Yet is such a challenge only thinkable via a complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency and autonomy? What follows from this Nietzschean position is a vision of the self as a masquerading performer, except of course we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask. Given how fragile and tenuous women's sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit-and-miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of female agency to a "doing without the doer" at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of necessity.

Benhabib: 1992, p.215, quoting from Butler: 1990, p.25.

Whilst Benhabib would agree with the notion that culture defines and shapes an individual identity she would argue against the idea that an individual is a Lockean "tabula rasa" or a wholly "neutral surface" (Benhabib: 1992, p.217). Butler is, however, concerned to reinstate ontological status to "abject bodies"; that is bodies who are deemed not to matter in society. These bodies which do not matter not only include women's bodies but also homosexual bodies, impoverished bodies and those who have been "identified as psychiatric 'cases'"

(Butler: 1998, p.281). Butler's philosophical argument is important for all those who are marginalised; her polemic encourages us to read the discourses which direct our lives and inhabit our bodies: "discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood" (Butler: 1998, p.282). Butler is concerned to avoid abstractions and to focus on specificity; she interrogates the systems which decide which subjects can and cannot lay claim to ontological status and to performatively "endow" ontology to particular abject bodies.

Foucault's earlier theories avoid locating domination and this is particularly disappointing for feminists who seek to expose and transform domination in gender relations. Many feminists are looking for a situated body and this entails a need to take account of a specific location which varies according to class, ethnicity and gender. A collective recognition of the effects of cultural forces on bodies might be more useful in terms of the political movement of bodies to deconstruct those forces which keep certain groups of people in a state of oppression. The postmodern notion of the death of the subject is not politically viable for women, or any marginal group which is finally finding the means to be heard. In order to construct a new society we must get to know ourselves in the world.

Marxist feminism would challenge Kant's notion of universal rationality and claim that because knowledge is constructed by the ruling classes, those with a vested interest, it is limited (16). Those who are marginalized, therefore, the Marxian proletariat, may have a more objective view and, as they are disinterested, an easier access to the "truth." Naturally, there are multiple marginalized voices and therefore multiple truths but a critique of the dominant order is both possible and necessary. Whilst "the body as text" theory is perhaps an enlightened one, feminists have been wary of a philosophy which, while seeming to retrieve power for the individual, may in some ways be an abstract and universalizing concept. Although, in *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault looks at the all-pervading effect of power

which constitutes the individual, its body and discourse, he does not address social structures.

Foucault's neutral analyses may follow a Nietzschean refusal of any notion of inherent truth

because truth only exists within given systems of power. Hence his work does not offer a

"liberating truth":

The idea of a liberating truth is a profound illusion. There is no truth which can be espoused, defended, rescued *against* systems of power. On the contrary, each such system defines its own variant of truth. There is no escape from power into freedom, for such systems of power are co-extensive with human society. We can only step from one to the other.

Hoy:1986, p. 69.

Foucault's discoveries and histories do not lead to liberatory projects or strategic standpoints because empowerment would only signal yet another illusory position and truth is only ever subordinated to power. These theories are disempowering for individuals in a subjugated position because of the insistence that power exists separately from the subject. But there is some contradiction, or at least ambivalence, within Foucault which is certainly highlighted by his later work. Foucault may reject notions of truth and freedom because of his repudiation of Enlightenment universal notions which suggest essentialism and inherent, hidden knowledges, but his work nevertheless points towards some kind of autonomy, as regards a dismantling of societal structures and an individual remaking of the self. Taylor suggests that Foucault might have moved beyond "the impossible attempt to stand nowhere" had his work continued (Taylor in Hoy: 1986, p.99).

The problem with what Bordo terms "gender scepticism" and the post-structuralist insistence of everyone's "difference" is that "the view from nowhere" (Thomas Nagel's term) becomes an abstract and unreal "dream of everywhere" (Bordo: 1993, pp. 216 -217). If the location and limitation of gendered experience is not brought into focus and taken account of, then the result will be a blurring of political objectives; a dislocated self is disengaged. Whilst we may wish to embrace a post-structuralist school of thought which transcends gender difference, the "neutral" perspective of multiplicity, heterogeneity and the infinitely changing

and unstable individual subject will not bring about a transformation of gendered experience.

The postmodern self, in this sense, is a schizophrenic self.

The problem with a post-structuralist view of the subject is that it might also result in a slip into an individualism which disperses any possibility of political action. If everyone is focused on their difference then how can groups be formed which might resist oppression and reformulate social systems? Self-discovery and personal transformation must surely work alongside some kind of recognition that, despite our differences, there are some connections within class, gender and race and across those areas wherein a more unified vision of domination and therefore consequent political action for change might be conceivable. It is not surprising that when the capitalist individualism of the nineteen-eighties took hold, feminism suffered its worst backlash.

The story of the body as a visible topos of societal modes cannot end there. Perhaps we should reject the notion that the body is an inert and immaterial product of societal forces and look more specifically at how we can educate young women in our own societies to think of themselves as beautiful no matter what their physical status. There is a body behind cultural inscription, behind the text of the beauty myth, and that body needs to be recovered, rescued from the male/female gaze, healed and nurtured.

## **Simone de Beauvoir**

Simone de Beauvoir's feminist position is quite different to that of the later French feminists in the sense that she repudiated all notions of female otherness. Women had been relegated to the position of Other for long enough. Victorian notions of essential femininity, positive as well as negative, had done nothing to ameliorate women's position in society. However, de Beauvoir did recognize female collectivity and believed that it was important for women to tell stories and to listen to stories of female experience. In *The Second Sex* de

Beauvoir further employs her intersubjective theory and urges women to say "we" rather than "I". She also makes a distinction between class and gender oppression, saying that the female position is not the same as that of the proletariat which is a "historical phenomenon." Women's oppression is not traceable to an event, it is a condition, hence her famous "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" is directly related to the notion that gender is a construct and that women learn to become part of that construct through subject/object relations. The subject inhabits not only the givens of the immanent past and present self but also the transcendent self projects itself into further fabricated "givens" and hence "chooses" not to be free. Not recognizing one's freedom, one's ability to transcend and make choices which fall outside of the dominant culture constitutes "bad faith." She was concerned to reject earlier philosophical notions of universalism and detachment (Archimedes, Kant, Descartes) and formulated instead a mode of thinking which focused on individual, personal experience, an Existential theory which took into account the human being's contact with the world. In order to describe and understand the world the subject must take account of her *concrete* (rather than abstract) and *particular* (rather than general/universalized) position and experience. Simone de Beauvoir repudiated the notion that there is a universalist standpoint. The embodied, situated subject lives in a material world and has a relationship to it and to other situated selves within it. Her philosophy, therefore also emphasized *intersubjectivity* and *reciprocity* as vital to ensure equality and freedom for all. Human consciousness is inseparable from the human body, the world which that body inhabits and other conscious bodies.

*The Second Sex* (1949) opens with this assertion: "The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.14). If we address this from an existential perspective, which assumes that there is an authentic self, then we can understand that a sense of loss would ensue whenever the self is perceived of as anything less than concrete. The diction here emphasizes solidity and unification therefore any notion of the

self being split, mergent, fluid, or dispersed would be an indication of ill-health. R.D. Laing also explains in *The Divided Self* (1960) the danger of losing all sense of self through the admittance of a double in his analysis of the psychology of the schizophrenic:

There is still an 'I' that cannot find a 'me'. An 'I' has not ceased to exist but it is without substance, it is disembodied, it lacks the quality of realness, and it has no identity, it has no 'me' to go with it. It may seem a contradiction in terms to say that the 'I' lacks identity but this seems to be so ... The schizophrenic either does not know who or what he is or he has become something or someone other than himself.  
Laing: 1990, p. 172.

This disembodiment alters our perception of what is within and what without. Laing argues that "personal unity is a prerequisite of reflective awareness" (Laing: 1990, p.197). The problem for women, however, is that they are defined by their bodies: "woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.15). For de Beauvoir, the notion of an "eternal feminine" is a flight from reality: "woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.66). In order to achieve full membership in the human race women need to recognise the reality, that they have been culturally produced, and transcend the essentialist, determinist notions which keep them subjected or remain forever without subjectivity: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.295). Whilst a man is free to achieve liberty by continually "reaching out towards other liberties" and justify his existence by transcending himself and engaging "in freely chosen projects" a woman cannot take such liberties. She is caught in a double bind, compelled to fulfil the essential roles of a daughter, wife, mother and always regarded as the one for whom freedom is not an essential right: "The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) - who always regards himself as the essential - and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential" (de

Beauvoir: 1972, p.29).

A rationalist vision necessitated a separation of consciousness from the world in order to achieve knowledge through pure reason, therefore, as Kate and Edward Fullbrook explain in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Introduction* (1998), de Beauvoir was far more influenced by the work of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) than the Kantian "Transcendental Analytic" or Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach to philosophy (a more scientific approach than Kant based on the notion that consciousness is related to the human body and the world and that the material provides the objects of knowledge, the truths which produce a universal self). Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, recognized both a subject's contingency, the human being's contextualized and located existence, and his/her freedom, his/her ability to transcend situatedness. Hence truth and moral choice are both individualistic and collective. His "rejection of the universal ego opened philosophy's door to the indeterminacies, the concrete particularities and, most importantly, the differences in human existence" (Fullbrooks: 1998, p.61). Kierkegaard raised questions which not only pointed towards Twentieth Century existentialism, and which are certainly relevant to de Beauvoir's thought but, as Fullbrook and Fullbrook indicate, these questions are also today's "modern questions":

What is the relation between an individual's freedom and the givenness of his or her situation? What is the nature of self-identity? How is the individual related to society? What is the ontological structure of an individual's relation to the world? How does one make moral choices without a set of moral absolutes? What is the relation between truth and the knowing subject?

Fullbrooks: 1998, p.61.

Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical thought also questioned the Empirical notion of the unity of the individual self. She recognized several splits within human identity: the *conscious* and *non conscious being*, subject/object (self and other), and the *immanent* and *transcendent* self. For de Beauvoir consciousness is dependent on relationality. Thus, rather than a body/mind split, she perceives of two kinds of body, one that is conscious and therefore related to the rest of being and one which is not. Also, in terms of the subject/object split de



Beauvoir was aware that looking within only produced the notion of a "void", that in fact we experience ourselves through the reactions of, and our relationship to, others. If we objectify ourselves, treat ourselves as an other, then we become aware of our own fragmentation into multiple selves. De Beauvoir developed a relational notion of consciousness. Consciousness requires an object and "is always conscious *of* something," therefore "consciousness is a relation which human beings have to objects, both real and imagined" (Fullbrooks: 1998, p.57). If there is no intended object, then there is nothing to be conscious of.

This notion of the *immanent* and the *transcendent* self has been influential to my own thinking and has had an impact on my reading of women's texts as we shall see later in my analysis of Woolf and Plath. This theory is also related to the notion of a narrative self which is fundamentally significant to feminist theory and criticism as it is explored throughout this thesis. We can locate the notion of a divided self within individual human beings, a self which is both situated and able to make choices given its ability to transcend and reflect on that situation. An individual subject is therefore not only located through its relationship to the past and present but also continually projecting a future self. The individual identifies itself with selves it may choose to become and also, according to de Beauvoir, identifies itself through its relationship with others, part of the given situatedness of existence. The transcendent self is therefore that part which is free, which uses the body as an instrument to realize the choices which extend the self as projected beyond the present and the past. The immanent self is the part of the individual which is particularly located, in terms of society, culture, history, race, class and gender. A denial of either of these would constitute "bad faith."

De Beauvoir's theory of the narrative self was derived from the notion that the subject recognizes a self which is immanent and a self which may become (transcendent) and these are not identical or unified. We therefore tell ourselves stories about what we are or may be, based on how other people describe or treat us and based on how we want to perceive ourselves, or

want others to perceive us. We then choose to inhabit those selves, choose, or refuse to perform. For de Beauvoir choice was the key issue. Women could choose to transcend the role of object or become alienated from herself, she could be passive to societal drives or she could assert her own authority and freedom. The problem, she acknowledges, is that women's choices are so often in accordance with how she has been defined rather than in relation to how she actually is.

So how can we incorporate de Beauvoir's philosophical thinking into a postmodern feminist perspective? The human individual is situated in an immanent and transcendent body, and is both subject and object of its own consciousness and is an object of others' consciousnesses. De Beauvoir uncovers many problems here which are gender specific. Intersubjective experiences have consequences. When I realize that I am perceived as an object by another I am affected by my perception of their observations and judgements and I might alter my behaviour should I perceive those judgements as critical and therefore believe that I am being perceived negatively. If I see an image of myself in someone else's eyes which is positive I might attempt to continually play that self which has won approval. I am not a unified being, but a being which can make changes continually in relation to others. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), de Beauvoir extends this notion as related to the individual to a notion which takes account of choices which are made in relation to the values of a social group. *The Second Sex* (1949) proceeds to take account of subject/object relations as they are applied to a gendered organization of behaviour. Given that male valuations are dominant in patriarchal society then it follows that women's values will be subjugated, even altered, to fit in with the whole. Only through an understanding of *intersubjectivity* we can reach an understanding of the oppression of certain groups within society. For example, if I create a positive sense of self through the reactions of my family, female friends and colleagues who reflect an image through their perceptions of me as a daughter, a mother, a teacher, that self

may be destabilised when I read the reflections received through male perceptions of me as a woman, a wife or lover, wherein my femininity may be objectified. In the latter case my body becomes a focal point, both biologically and in terms of material aesthetics. Can I look into my own mirror and see a self which is not defined through relationality? Is there a self which is not constructed out of the experience of being with others, a self behind those reflected images? To what extent are my selves performances acted out in order to please those around me? And, if, as a woman, part of my self image is always related to my feminine body, then what effect does that objectification have on my sense of being a subject rather than an object, or a fetishised other? If there is an essential private and a communal public self, how can we appropriate these selves as part of a feminist project?

Whilst the terms narcissist and woman are almost interchangeable, Simone de Beauvoir explains that: "narcissism is a well-defined process of identification, in which the ego is regarded as an absolute end and the subject takes refuge from himself in it" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.597). She suggests that it is largely women's dissatisfaction with her life experience and with the love that she receives from others which leads to a need to develop a kind of romance with herself. Love of one's self, as with all kinds of love, requires the parallel existence of subject and object. The inward dialogue of the narcissist is necessary for the production of coherence and order, the mirror serves to create a unified image. Whilst to some this relationship between self and other within an individual might be regarded as a positive and possibly healing process, to de Beauvoir there is an obvious danger regarding selfhood for within existential ethics there is an assumption that an essential self exists and that this self should be discreet and circumvented. The Cartesian theory of a distinct, but not disturbing, split between body and mind, subject and object is perhaps visible within de Beauvoir's suggestion that a relationship with that objectified self in the mirror is indicative of a transgressing of boundaries and will lead to the subject being captured and trapped within the

glass. The argument here is that when the distinctions between self and other dissolve we are left with nothing, a no-being.

De Beauvoir claims that whilst the magic of the mirror is helpful in terms of attaining some kind of identification of the self, herself imagined as her own heroine can never actually be realised, therefore the self does not meet realization in the concrete world. The fact that it is impossible to fully "recognise oneself consciously as object" and that the "duality is merely dreamed" leads to the materialisation of the dreamed object self in the doll. The young girl therefore "sees herself in the doll more concretely than in her own body" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.598). A reclamation of subjectivity became de Beauvoir's feminist project and she achieved this through an exposition of an oppressive objectification of women. Let us now consider how these themes have been further explored through Angela Carter's fiction.

### **The Narcissist in Angela Carter's *Magic Toyshop* (1967)**

Carter is often described as a "magical realist", she questioned societal constructs of sex, class and justice through the language of fiction but, particularly in her later novels, these explorations are more playful than polemically moralistic. Carter situates herself clearly as a political, feminist writer but she leaves her polemical viewpoint open in terms of addressing the reader, thus allowing the reader do the work. Her hope is that through her fiction she aims to present:

a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. (Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.)  
Carter: 1997, p.37.

She notes that her evolution in terms of growing into feminism was a process of maturation and she thinks this is reflected in the changes in her writing. She particularly questions the nature of reality for women in terms of the construction of the fiction of 'femininity'. This construct is created outside of the woman's control and then "palmed off ... as the real thing"

(Carter: 1997, p.38).

Rather than mysticism, Carter was interested in the material reality of the here and now world as it is. She explains that having spent most of her working life self-employed, and therefore not on the front line of a mixed sex working environments, her radicalisation took place through her experience of sexual and emotional relations. Therefore in her writing "sexuality and its manifestations in human practice" becomes a major theme (Carter: 1997, p.39). Far from being against rationality, Carter continually engaged with socio-historical reality and her writing is interesting to us here as she explores women's situated lives, their relationship with the body and the role of the imagination:

Obviously the idea that my stories are all dreams or hallucinations out of Jung-land, or the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away our rationality and went laughing down the street, or even the one that schizophrenia is an enriching experience, that's all nonsense. I can see how it must look to some readers, but the point is that if dreams are real as dreams, then there is a materiality to symbols; there's a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously.

Carter: 1997, p.85.

Carter's texts provide us with a useful link between notions of an existential self and a later deconstructed idea of the self. Her movement towards a representation of the self as a wholly performative and constructed being can be traced from Melanie to Fevvers, who we will encounter at the end of this thesis. Let us begin with Melanie.

A reading of Carter's second novel, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), which is primarily concerned with developing adolescent female sexuality, alongside de Beauvoir's theories relating to narcissism, the development of young girls and sexual initiation, will give us an insight into how fiction can further explore a feminist viewpoint. Puppetry and performance as a tragic doll form the climax of this novel which opens with the central character Melanie posing and posturing in front of her mirror, touching herself and luxuriating in her body:

For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades.

Carter: 1981, p.1. (17)

The fairy-tale grotto and the bud-wing shoulder blades are immediately significant here as they look forward to Melanie's encounter with a monstrous puppet swan in a reconstruction of the rape of Leda but also the suggestion of wings serves as a precursive image which will later be fully developed through Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), a fantastic and yet far more autonomous being / woman.

As this novel progresses, mirrors disappear and are replaced by peepholes and paintings and Melanie's hands become less and less a part of herself. The opening line tells us: "The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood" (p.1). This suggests the beginning of menstruation for Melanie and according to de Beauvoir this is when the anxiety of being female begins to take hold and affect subjectivity. In terms of psychology a splitting of the subject occurs precisely because the distinction between the psychic and physical life of a young girl becomes almost indistinct:

one of the characteristics of female psychology is the close relation between the endocrine secretions and the nervous regulation: there is a reciprocal action. The body of a woman - particularly that of a young girl - is a 'hysterical' body, in the sense that there is, so to speak, no distance between the psychic life and its physiological realization. The disorders of puberty are made worse by the upsetting effect their discovery has upon the young girl. Because her body seems suspect to her, and because she views it with alarm, it seems to her to be sick: it is sick. [...] It is in great part the anxiety of being a woman that devastates the feminine body.  
de Beauvoir: 1972, p. 356.

The opening passage continues with an account of Melanie's celebration of the flesh and an exploration her body: "she would writhe about, clasping herself. laughing, sometimes doing cart-wheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl" (p.1). This kind of "solitary pleasure," according to de Beauvoir, signals a woman's ability to "divide herself into male subject and female object." The young girl's education "has prompted her to identify herself with her whole body, puberty has revealed this body as being passive and desirable; it is something she can touch, like satin or velvet, and can contemplate with a lover's eye" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.598).

Melanie imagines herself both a Pre-Raphaelite model and a chorus girl sitting for Toulouse

Lautrec. As Spaul and Millard point out these poses "are derived from male images of women," images which are shaping her sense of identity (Mills, Pearce et al.: 1989, p.134). As de Beauvoir suggests the link between fairy-tale magic and passivity is a strong one:

Magic involves the idea of passive force; because she is doomed to passivity and yet wants power, the adolescent girl must believe in magic: in that of her body, which will bring men under her yoke; in that of fate in general, which will crown her desires without her having to *do* anything.  
de Beauvoir: 1972, p.364.

Hence the world of reality is rejected and daydreaming becomes more prevalent as a means to escape the fear that physical development will entail alienation and a loss of freedom (de Beauvoir: 1972, pp.333 & 337).

Melanie prepares herself as a fairy-tale character dressing up in her mother's wedding outfit. She first wrestles with the veil which blinds and suffocates her, then puts on the heavy dress which is described more in terms of a death-shroud than the "marvellous wedding-dress" she had so often admired in a photograph: "It was very cold to touch. It slithered over her, cold as a slow hosing with ice-water, and she shivered and caught her breath" (p.15). Dressed as a bride, she goes into the garden and shakes "with ecstasy" but the dress is too big and she is too young. This is "Too much, too soon" (p.18). After sobbing and panicking, sensing monsters all around her, she takes off the wedding-dress and climbs naked up the apple tree which grows beside her bedroom window, dragging and tearing the too-big dress behind her, while apples fall to the ground beneath her. Afraid of falling, we gain a further insight into Melanie's fragile sense of adolescent subjectivity which has curbed her former childish adventurous spirit:

Since she was thirteen, when her periods began, she had felt she was pregnant with herself, bearing the slowly ripening embryo of Melanie - grown-up inside herself for a gestation time the length of which she was not precisely aware. And during this time, to climb a tree might provoke a miscarriage and she would remain forever stranded in childhood, a crop-haired tomboy.  
Carter: 1981, p. 20.

Boys climb trees and have adventures, she may do cart-wheels in the privacy of her own bedroom but in the outside world spontaneity must be repressed, the body must become

docile, she must preserve her femininity.

Like Eve after the Fall, Melanie is ashamed of her nakedness:

She was horribly conscious of her own exposed nakedness. She felt a new and final kind of nakedness, as if she had taken even her own skin off and now stood clothed in nothing, nude in the ultimate nudity of the skeleton. She was almost surprised to see the flesh of her fingers; her very hands might have been discarded like gloves, leaving only the bones.

Carter: 1981, p.21.

The skeletal hands here are reminiscent of the frame of a puppet. The following day Melanie and her two siblings hear the news that both their parents have died and, in her grief and guilt, Melanie smashes her mirror and becomes "unbending as wood" (p.26). Here we meet a Snow White (white skin, black hair, dead mother) who will no longer have the use of a conventional mirror to see her own reflection:

She went into her bedroom. She met herself in the mirror, white face, black hair. The girl who killed her mother. She picked up the hairbrush and flung it at her reflected face. The mirror shattered. Behind the mirror was nothing but the bare wood of her wardrobe.

She was disappointed; she wanted to see her mirror, still, and the room reflected in the mirror, still, but herself gone, smashed.

Carter: 1981, pp.24-25.

Melanie and her two orphaned siblings are sent to live with their Uncle Philip, a toymaker. Uncle Philip is an imposing Bluebeard character who, like the villain in "The Bloody Chamber" (1979), makes his wife wear a collar-like necklace which digs into her neck. He evokes a constant undercurrent of violence and his presence "suppressed the idea of laughter" (p.124). Aunt Margaret, his wife, likened to a bird in a cage (p.42) has been dumb since her wedding day. Melanie soon learns that this red-haired Irish trio have a secret life when Uncle Philip is not around; "the red people," as she calls them, play music and dance together in the kitchen when the children are in bed. Melanie becomes an observer, spying on them through the door's keyhole, and in turn she is observed by Finn through a peephole in her own bedroom wall.

There are no mirrors at Uncle Philip's house, the theatre, Finn's eyes and his paintings, act as mirrors throughout the rest of the novel. As the external drive towards fulfilment of her



femininity becomes stronger, so the ability to see herself except through others becomes weaker. Melanie is entangled in a physiognomical world where transcendence of the fiction of femininity is looking more and more impossible. At this stage in the young girl's development de Beauvoir suggests that the feminine function begins to imitate immanence: "the eyes no longer penetrate, they reflect; the body is no longer alive, it waits; every gesture and smile becomes an appeal. Disarmed, disposable, the young girl is now only an offered flower, a fruit to be picked" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.381).

When Finn takes Melanie to a deserted pleasure garden (the ruins of the National Exposition of 1852) she becomes an Alice, on the other side of the looking-glass. Her superstitious response to the white and black squares, reminiscent of Carroll's chessboard, remind us that Melanie is trying to negotiate some kind of control over her fate:

If she did not tread on any of the black, perhaps when she got to the end of the floor she would shiver and rouse in her long-lost bed, in her striped sheets, and say good morning to the apple tree and look at her own face in the mirror she had not broken. She had not seen her reflection since. She was seized with panic, remembering that she had not seen her own face for so long.  
Carter: 1981, p.103.

But Melanie is passive and far less assertive than Alice, she watches things happen to her and does not take part in the action. Just before Finn kisses her for the first time, standing next to a statue of Queen Victoria, she sees herself reflected in his eyes:

She could see her own face reflected in little in the black pupils of his subaqueous eyes. She still looked the same. She saluted herself. He was only a little taller than she and their eyes were almost on a level. Remotely, she wished him three inches taller. Or four. She felt the warm breath from his wild beast's mouth softly, against her cheek. She did not move. Stiff, wooden and unresponsive, she stood in his arms and watched herself in his eyes. It was a comfort to see herself as she thought she looked.  
Carter: 1981, p.105.

It is interesting that "remotely" Melanie wishes that Finn were taller, somewhere in her consciousness there is perhaps a desire to be over-powered, in this way she could fulfil her feminine role as a docile, passive body under the shadow of Victorian morality. This masochistic tendency, de Beauvoir suggests, exists when the individual chooses to be treated as a thing and so only when "the ego is set up as separate and when this estranged self, or

double, is regarded as dependent upon the will of others" (de Beauvoir: 1972, p.420).

However, if Finn were taller, she would be over-looked, she would not be able to see herself and here Melanie's narcissistic tendency remains strong and is a comfort to her. Nevertheless, Carter's puppet imagery here also suggests that Melanie remains unbending to the suggestion of passion because no one is pulling her strings. This, too, can be related to de Beauvoir's notion of female sexual dependence:

The role of the initiator belongs to the young man anatomically and conventionally [...] the virgin young man's first mistress also gives him his initiation; but even so he has an erotic independence clearly shown by his erection; his mistress simply provides in its reality the object he already desires: a woman's body. The young girl needs a man to reveal her own body to her: she is much more deeply dependent.  
de Beauvoir: 1972, p. 401.

Still not ready for a sexual awakening, Melanie takes an alienated and objective view of her situation as if looking at her life through the lens of a camera or projected onto some big screen. Eroticism is, for her, something foreign, objectified through the performances of others. It is ultimately something to do with romance, and Melanie does not feel romantic:

She thought vaguely that they must look very striking, like a shot from a new-wave British film, locked in an embrace beside the broken statue in this dead fun palace, with the November dusk swirling around them and Finn's hair so ginger, hers so black, spun together by the soft little hands of a tiny wind, yellow and black hairs tangled together. She wished someone was watching them, to appreciate them, or that she herself was watching them, Finn kissing this black-haired young girl, from a bush a hundred yards away. Then it would seem romantic.  
Carter: 1981, p.106.

This self-voyeuristic vision of her first sexual encounter from a distance is perhaps an indication of how alienated women become from their own bodies. Although her first kiss does not match the romantic hopes of her imagination, it does mark the end of her mourning and she tears off the black band on her sleeve. The mother is finally abjected as Melanie herself moves inevitably towards motherhood.

Hands are, I believe, central to this bildungsroman and central to my reading of this female protagonist who perhaps marks a starting point for Carter's heroines who move further and further away from passivity, sexual repression and frigidity, rigidity, fear of passion, fear of the

female body (18). Following an incident in which Finn cuts his hand so badly with a chisel that he can no longer paint, Melanie is left alone in the kitchen. The following hallucination can be read both as a textual connection to dismemberment in the Bluebeard story but, I will argue, could also be read, in light of other references to hands in the text, as perhaps an even more far-reaching feminist proposition as regards agency; independent action rather than any passive puppet-like performance instigated through the hands of some other active subject.

It was pleasant to be in the kitchen and Melanie hummed to herself as she hung cups from their hooks and propped the plates. She opened the dresser drawer to put away the knives and spoons. In the dresser drawer was a freshly severed hand, all bloody at the roots.

It was soft-looking, plump little hand with pretty, tapering fingers the nails of which were tinted with a faint, pearly laquer. There was a thin silver ring of the type small girls wear on the fourth finger. It was the hand of a child who goes to dancing class and wears frilled petticoats with knickers to match. From the raggedness of the flesh at the wrist, it appeared that the hand has been hewn from its arm with a knife or axe that was very blunt. Melanie heard blood fall plop in the drawer.

'I am going out of my mind,' she said aloud. 'Bluebeard was here.'

She closed the drawer and leaned against the dresser. She was drenched in sweat and her mouth was dry. After a moment, her knees gave way and she slithered to the floor in a clattering hail of cutlery. All the furniture in the room danced up and down. The chairs jiggled from one leg to the other. The table waltzed ungracefully. The cuckoo clock spun round and round. She lay on the heaving ground, frozen for fear of moving.

Carter: 1981, p.118.

This scene is almost comical with its Disneyesque dancing crockery but Melanie's fear of madness and loss of consciousness undermines the comic, tainting it with the macabre instead and we are reminded through Francie's explanation that the hallucination is "natural" due to the "distress of [her] loss"; that is the loss of her mother (p.121) (19).

Following a disastrous puppet performance, part of the family's Sunday ritual, Uncle Philip decides he will use Melanie to act with his puppets. The narrative comes full circle as she is dressed and prepared for her role as Leda in white chiffon: "All at once, Melanie was back home and swathing herself in diaphanous veiling before a mirror" (p.141). Uncle Philip makes the huge swan which will rape his Leda and provides artificial daisies: "Melanie would be a nymph crowned with daisies once again; he saw her as once she had seen herself. In spite of everything, she was flattered" (p.141). But Uncle Phillip resents her because she is not a puppet and, as Finn explains, the play "is only a vehicle for his handsome swan" (p.147).

Melanie realises, despite her initial sense of being flattered, that she would not like herself if she could see herself in costume and make-up. She must practice with Finn because she cannot see the swan in advance; in the real performance she must react spontaneously. But her movements are not fluid, the rehearsal is a farce and Melanie cannot act as if she is afraid. Her amusement is stilled only by the beginning of her sexual awakening:

'This is the start,' she said to herself, clearly. She heard her own voice, certain and distinct, inside her head. No more false starts, as in the pleasure gardens, but the real beginning of a deep mystery between them. What would he do to her, would he be kind? She looked down with a fear that was also a pleasure at his stained, scarred hand. His workman's hand, which was strong and cunning. The light seemed to die about her, leaving her to see by her senses only.  
Carter: 1981, p.149.

Finn cannot respond because he has been instructed to rape her by his uncle and he refuses to be manipulated and let their strings be pulled. Also, despite her supposed clarity, he is disturbed by Melanie's verbal communication, "the words which floated on top of her mind" (p.155), because he thinks it exposes an inauthentic response on her part. Her language is rejected as words she has picked up from women's magazines. Finn demystifies the encounter, what she feels is due to "proximity" not love, he explains (p.155). Equally, Melanie is disturbed by Finn's use of the word "fuck":

She was deeply agitated. She had never connected the word with herself; her phantom bridegroom would never have fucked her. They would have made love. But Finn, she acknowledged with a sinking of her spirit, would have.  
Carter: 1981, pp.151-152.

She may be ready in the flesh but her mind is still tainted with romantic images. She has not reached sexual maturity which would enable her to respond freely, and, as Finn declares, they are living in a madhouse which makes autonomous action near impossible (p.153). It seems that the need for mutual autonomous action has not occurred to Melanie.

However, Melanie gains another opportunity to see herself reflected through Finn when she sees his painting of her as a mirror image, this image would seem to undermine Finn's supposed autonomy:

she saw herself, and was touched.

She was taking off her chocolate sweater and was all twisted up, a rather thin but nicely made young girl with a delicate, withdrawn face, against a wall of dark red roses. Her wallpaper. She looked very scrubbed. She looked like a virgin who cleaned her teeth after every meal and delighted to take bites from rosy apples. Her black hair exploded about her head in great Art Nouveau ripples. It looked as though Finn was trying his hand at curves. The picture was as flat and uncommunicative as all his pictures and seemed to be an asexual kind of pin-up. Round the upper part of her right arm was a black band. He did not see her precisely as she saw herself but it could have been very much worse. Carter: 1981, pp.153-154.

The image is reminiscent of the images she conjured of herself at the opening of the novel, and perhaps indicates that Finn is not as free from the strings of culturally produced ideas of love, romance and femininity as he purports to be.

Bored on Christmas day, Melanie is left to consider her purpose and position:

She did not know what to do with herself. She picked the dead yellow leaves of the geranium and crumpled them to fragrant dust between her fingers. She stared at her hand. Four fingers and a thumb. Five nails.

'This is my hand. Mine. But what is it for?' she thought. 'What does it mean?'

Her hand seemed wonderful and surprising, an object which did not belong to her and of which she did not know the use. The fingers were people, the members of a family. The thumb the father, short and thick-set, probably a North countryman, with flat, assertive vowels in his speech, and the forefinger the mother, a tall, willowy lady, of middle-class origins, who said: 'dahling' frequently and ate dessert oranges with a knife and fork. Had he married above his station, in the flush of self-made money? He had the bluff, upright stance of a man who has made his own way in the world. And three fine children, two full grown, a big boy and girl, and one just coming into its teens. She flexed her hand, and, obligingly, the family performed a brief dance for her. Then she was horrified.

Carter: 1981, pp.161-162.

Not only does her hand seem a separate part of her, as useless as a severed hand, but also when she observes its movements it plays out her destiny, performing presumably something that resembles the nuclear families she has experienced so far in her life. What is horrifying is that even when Melanie actively "flexed" her hand it merely revealed its part as a symbolic object in the patriarchal theatre to come.

Again, she believes she is going mad and so responds passively when the puppet show reaches its climax. Melanie has not matured, has not resolved what she could do with her hands. She is afraid, not of the swan, but of "giving herself to the swan" (p.162). At first, the swan is comical "a grotesque parody of a swan ... nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings" (p.165). But then she imagines that, like the horse of Troy:

a trapdoor in the swan's side might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all clockwork, might rush out and savage her. This possibility seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers. The swan towered over the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not.

Carter: 1981, p.166.

Melanie's detachment from herself is signalled most forcefully by the words "this girl", for surely the narrative voice here is hers. On the stage she is both girl and doll, both Melanie and not. When the "obscene" swan mounts her its "gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh" and, after repeated screaming, again she loses consciousness and wakes to find her dress half torn off. Melanie's sexual initiation leaves her feeling insubstantial; she "felt she cast no shadow" (p.169).

Although the denouement signals the completion of Melanie's rite of passage, a feminist reading cannot read the outcome as satisfactory. Nor is Melanie's future going to be a romantic fulfilment of her dreams. Melanie loses the constructed romantic idealism which opens the novel and her "prophetic vision" that she will marry Finn marks her entrance into a more mature and realistic view of relationships.

She knew they would get married one day and live together all their lives and there would always be pervasive squalor and dirt and mess and shabbiness, always, forever and forever. And babies crying and washing to be done and toast burning all the rest of her life. And never any glamour or romance or charm. Nothing fancy. Only mess and babies with hair. She revolted.

Carter: 1981, p.177.

When Finn later voices his matter of fact certainty that they will have a family at the breakfast table and christen the first baby "Proximity", Melanie again baulks at this bleak prospect:

Melanie choked on a mouthful. Waiting outside, possibly on the landing, stood a chattering troupe of squinting, red-haired children jostling for admission to her belly. Francie struck her briskly on the back and soon she recovered sufficiently to finish her breakfast.

Carter: 1981, p.183.

This bildungsroman is about the female rite of passage into the inevitable confinement of a nuclear family. Lucy Armitt also argues that this is not, for Melanie, an "edenic, utopian escape" she has merely passed from one puppet master to another (Armitt: 2000, p.211).

Melanie does not learn what she can achieve by her own hand but places herself, and accepts that her future is to be played out, within the hands of another.

The final line seems to suggest open-endedness: "At night, in the garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise" (p.199). But, despite the word "surmise," Melanie is denied an independent means of escape (she needs Finn for protection), and gains no access to her own sexuality. Millard asserts that "The story then can be read as a fable of the absence of what can be written of female desire" (Mills, Pearce et al.: 1989, p.177). In the light of this let us now consider women's problematic relationship to language and how that might relate to notions of female madness.

## Women and Language

Shoshana Felman explains the constructed linguistic relationship between women and madness and asks: "Is it by chance that hysteria (significantly derived, as is well known, from the Greek word for 'uterus') was originally conceived as an exclusively *female* complaint, as the lot and prerogative of women?" (Felman in Belsey and Moore: 1989, p.133). Felman addresses the problem of the voice of the female hysteric and asks how women can speak both as mad and not mad. How do women write about madness within a phallogocentric system which privileges reason, logic, the unified signifier, single, discrete identities of the Symbolic Order which are intrinsically linked to the Law of the Father:

If, in our culture, the woman is by definition associated with madness, her problem is how to break out of this (cultural) imposition of madness *without* taking up the critical and therapeutic positions of reason: how to avoid speaking both as *mad* and as *not mad*. The challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to re-invent language, to re-learn how to speak: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning.  
Felman in Belsey and Moore: 1989, pp.152-153.

The concern of Anglo-American feminists of the seventies and eighties seemed focused on uncovering women's texts and bringing them into the literary canon, exposing the feminist themes within those texts, offering a feminist literary critique of the portrayal of women in

male texts, creating a women's space separate from men's where specifically female topics could be explored, and retrieving a female history and female creativity. The writing of Adrienne Rich, Mary Ellman and Kate Millett, for example, was valued for its exposition and rethinking of constructions of femininity and women's role within, and exclusion from, society. This materialist approach to language was part of a feminist project which differed greatly from that of contemporary French Feminists whose perception and intention was more radical in its deconstructive methods. From these theorists came an ebullient outpouring of philosophy which both embraced the female body and brought forth a new language in order to express the experience of being female. This writing was most influential for its ability to celebrate womanhood and uncompromisingly expose constructs which would place boundaries around women. Madness is portrayed as a construct created in order to control women, madness is exposed as a result of controlling patriarchal forces, and rebellion, overall, necessitates that we embrace what might be considered to be madness in order to be heard; these I read as the premises of French Feminist textual politics. This passionate and polemical approach which expresses the relationship between body and language and a blurring of the distinctions between logical (phallogentric) discourse and a more aestheticized feminist poetics has offered me an invaluable inroad to Woolf and Plath, for example, as we shall see later.

The existence of an essential female nature which is inseparable from the body is the area of philosophy which was explored by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Although Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) introduced the notion that women needed to form a new language to express female experience and experimented herself by breaking down the traditional form of the novel into a more fluid form using free indirect discourse to express the multiplicity of female consciousness, it was the French writers of the early seventies, the female writers who emerged from the intellectual revolution of 1968 in Paris, who offered a new and different perception as part of a second



wave of feminism. These writers really began to take this notion further and fully enter into an experimental creation of women's language which related directly to the experience of living in a female body: "Écriture Féminine".

Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva were concerned to indicate a radical break with, or progression from, the earlier Existential thought and theory of Simone de Beauvoir. Her famous saying "One is not born a woman one becomes one" from *The Second Sex* (1949) was no longer relevant to their polemic. Hélène Cixous wanted to emphasize the fact that "one is born a woman," that women have a female body, different to that of the male, that this female body has been constricted and constrained due to fear of "the dark continent" (Freud) of femininity and the need to control it. Whereas de Beauvoir exposed the positing of woman as a lack, a negative, a marginalized Other, Irigaray challenges in *The Sex which is not One* (1977) the Western philosophy of the self which places men on the side of signifying subject and women on the side of signified other and she exposes this as a system which negates female existence rather than signals sexual difference. However, de Beauvoir was not rejected and in fact fully supported the new movement. The emphasis in her feminist polemics, particularly *The Second Sex* (1949), had been a socio-historical exposition of the confining patriarchal constructs which kept women imprisoned by their bodies. The emphasis was on motherhood, the home, narcissism, the difficulties women encounter if they want to say no to motherhood and pursue instead a career, or try to negotiate a position where both were possible. Her project was not to celebrate difference but to instigate equality and posit a situated self.

As Judith Butler explains: "Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (Butler: 1990, p.9). Butler points out

that the body has prescribed boundaries and the division of the subject into "inner" and "outer" worlds in order to regulate behaviour "is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (Butler: 1990, p.133). This "otherness" is another concern for women. In *The Powers of Horror* (1982) Julia Kristeva explains that the coherence of a subject is not possible because the boundary between internal and external is not a "sealed" surface. The body has openings through which fluids pass and the excremental passages allow what is inside to come out, therefore she contends the "other" is abjected as fearful bodily pollution, filth, waste, shit. That which is expelled is alien and to establish stability and coherence the subject must differentiate herself from the abject.

Judith Butler thus raises the following questions:

From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? In what language is 'inner space' figured? What kind of figuration is it, and through what figure of the body is it signified? How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?  
Butler, 1990: p.134.

Foucault clearly rejected the notions of an internalized identity and a true "inner" self which could be discovered but it may seem that writers such as Cixous, whilst embracing multiplicity, are reclaiming such notions as part of a feminist polemic.

Hélène Cixous claims in "Medusa" (1975) that women have been driven violently away from their bodies and from language, she expresses her own fear of articulation; for women reclaiming language is an effort to overcome the threat of once more being silenced and a somewhat fearful entrance into a foreign domain. The female body needs to be celebrated, female sexuality should no longer be a taboo, an unknown, feared and hated by both men and women. It should be articulated and this requires a new language because never before has that female body, that female sexuality been explored and articulated by women, for women. Cixous does not advocate a transcendence of the body but of those forces which control it. She retrieves a body which is no longer docile but active, a body which is specifically feminine:

Almost everything is to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies: not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright.

Cixous in Marks and de Courtivron: 1980, p. 355.

In terms of style Cixous adopts metaphorical language which maps out a road to discovery. In much of her writing she voices a positive exploration of the zone of femininity in order to counter-balance patriarchal notions of a fearsome "dark continent" as mentioned above.

Cixous appropriates and exploits the notion that women are closer to the body than men and that the body is a text, she wants women to inhabit that space from which she has been driven and to speak /write from and about the body. The construction of the relationship between the female body and language, as purported by such thinkers as Jacques Lacan, is fully exposed and undermined within Cixous' writing. Lacan's model of human development links the stages towards maturity outlined by Freud to stages related to the acquisition of language and entrance into the Symbolic, integration within "the Law of the Fathers" via the "phallic stage." According to Lacan, the necessary separation from the mother, the breaking of dyadic unity ("abjection" of the mother's body in Kristevan terms), is simultaneous with a recognition of the father, linguistic development and the formation of the unconscious. From a feminist perspective clearly this is problematic. The female body must become untouchable, taboo, unspoken, hidden and locked away in the dumping ground of the unconscious if the child is to achieve maturity. The feminist project set about to unsettle the notion that : "Woman is a gap, a silence, invisible and unheard, repressed in the unconscious" (Millard: 1989, p.157). Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" is a powerful answer to those patriarchal giants Freud and Lacan:

Their "symbolic" exists, it holds power - we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well. But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father. Because we don't want that. We don't fawn around the supreme hole. We have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative. Cixous in Marks and de Courtivron: 1980, p. 354.

Julia Kristeva exposes the oppression of motherhood and underlines the supposed problems of the female child who at the point of entrance to the symbolic must distance herself from the female body and turn instead to the father, or remain in the confines of the psychotic, mergent dyad. For those who are female, separation from the mother is also separation from/rejection of her own body and a realization that she has a weaker relationship to knowledge and language than her male counterpart.

The route back to the mother and to the time before the abjection of the female body is a recurring theme within French feminism and one which is inextricably linked to women's access to language as we can see here in Luce Irigaray's "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" (1991):

... we must not once more kill the mother ... We must give her new life, new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us. We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger.

We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [langage] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [langue] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.

Irigaray in Whitford: 1991, p. 43.

In Cixous' and Irigaray's texts, in particular, we find that the body is expressed no longer as a prison house. These writers speak the unspeakable, undo the silences and taboos, take pleasure in and celebrate female flesh and to do this they have to develop female writing. They aim to deconstruct male linguistic theory and psycho-analysis which emphasizes unity, discretion, logic, control because female sexuality is not unified (phallic), discreet and limited. These writers assimilate and exploit those old mythologies which would threaten and control by saying, yes I am the witch, the medusa, the whore and I am not afraid or ashamed. Like Carter, these women base new theory on old models and deconstruct that old theory by rewriting it from a female perspective. They occupy and speak out of that space created on the margins for women, that silent space of feared female sexuality, uncontrollable Babylonian

lusts, hysterical voices.

In some respects the French feminist emphasis on sexual difference perhaps seems to signal a more separatist movement than that of Woolf who, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), talks about the need for an androgynous consciousness for the artist, insisting that one must not think of one's sex if one is to write. However, one could also point out that rather than set up an "outsider's society" as Woolf suggests women should do in *Three Guineas* (1938) these women set about deconstructing the status quo in terms of patriarchal linguistic, psycho-analytical and philosophical theories from the inside. In fact Irigaray was expelled from Lacan's L'École de Lettres for her radical rethinking of such theories.

Not only did these female writers enrage those males in a position of power but also those feminists who had been deconstructing the patriarchal myths of femininity which defined women as hysterical, emotional, illogical, more nature than culture, more body than mind. The debate centres around the question of whether a description of femaleness works against emancipation. For what were these writers doing other than bringing the female body into the forefront of consciousness, expressing themselves through ebullient and passionate outpourings, returning to some semiotic babble which indicated a refusal to separate, a tendency to mergence, an inability to mature? How could this seemingly hysterical or monstrous outburst, where the emphasis is on sexual desire and pleasure, further a feminist polemic which had insisted that the woman be released from the constrictions of her body, be viewed as equally capable to enter into the professions as politician, teacher, medic, philosopher?

Susan Bordo writes about the "retreat from female otherness," a reluctance to celebrate or romanticize sexual difference and behaviour because of its possible counter effectivity in terms of integration into the professions (Bordo: 1993, pp.229-233). The political premise was, certainly within Cixous' texts, a refusal of the Symbolic and an embrace of the Semiotic in

order to give voice to the feminine and unsettle the dominant masculine discourse. Toril Moi explains in *Sexual/Textual Politics* that although Irigaray's expulsion from L'École des Lettres was a dramatic example of patriarchal dominance, her writing also caused an acrimonious feminist debate especially following the publication of *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974). Many began to question the value of this kind of writing as feminist polemic.

Elaine Showalter's essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) particularly takes issue with what she terms "the wild zone" of French feminism:

Ideas about the body are fundamental to understanding how women conceptualize their situation in society; but there can be no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures. The difference of women's literary practice, therefore, must be sought (in Miller's words) in 'the body of her writing and not the writing of her body'.

...

The advocacy of a women's language is thus a political gesture that also carries tremendous emotional force. But despite its unifying appeal, the concept of a women's language is riddled with difficulties ... Language and style are never raw and instinctual but are always the products of innumerable factors, of genre, tradition, memory, and context.

The appropriate task for feminist criticism, I believe, is to concentrate on women's access to language, on the available lexical range from which words can be selected, on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocation.

Showalter in Lodge: 1988, p.341.

Where some would argue that French feminism disrupts and unsettles the patriarchal from within, others would argue that such feminist theorists merely perpetuate definitions and perceptions which have kept women in psychological and physical chains for centuries in terms of biological essentialism and their relationship to language. Showalter claims that a female language and a wholly "female space" is an unrealisable ideal in terms of politics because it is necessary to communicate within the dominant discourse as well as from the margins. Once again we seem to be meeting with a resistance to embrace a utopian vision. Whilst these French feminist writers would argue that their voices had begun to inhabit a new space beyond the margins, their critics would argue that this was not a place from which to make a real difference within society.

## Writing the Body: the Schizophrenic and Autobiography

A distinguishing feature of the later French Feminist writers Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva is that their texts embrace a kind of performativity and simultaneously reclaim the female body as the subject of their discourse. In order to find a voice they discovered a language which reflected a powerful agency or subjectivity. Carolyn Burke rightly points to the discomfort which accompanies the finding of a voice in her "Report":

... when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be uncomfortable.  
Carolyn Burke: *Signs*, Summer 1978, p.851.

Sidonie Smith considers that the *écriture féminine* of the French feminists which articulates female difference signals a promising refusal to integrate women's writing into the phallogocentric traditions of Western culture because: "women's true autobiography has yet to be written, since women writers have, until recently, only reinscribed male writing" (Smith: 1987, p.18). Smith, however, reminds us of the discomfort expressed by those Anglo-American theorists who question the validity of "psychosexual essentialism" and would rather emphasise historical and cultural difference in terms of oppression than celebrate a victorious articulation/representation of the unrepresentable (Smith: 1987, p.18). Drawing on Carolyn Burke's report which highlights women's discomfort with self-articulation Smith explains:

The discomfort derives from her cultural ventriloquism, a gesture of impersonation that requires the autobiographer to speak like a man; for, speaking like a man, she may be unable to recognize the lineaments of her experience in the language and fictions that surround and inform her text.  
Smith, 1987: p.57.

Many of the texts which we will encounter later could be categorised as autobiographical but what do I mean by that term? Clearly the non-fiction writing which is to be found in letters and diaries is understood initially to be autobiographical because the writers, at least to a certain extent, aim to tell the 'truth' about their lives without embracing any kind of "cultural

ventriloquism." We have already encountered a text which is read as a fictionalisation of the writer's life in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Also, as we shall see, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are arguably novels of self-representation because we can trace within them details which are part of the writers' biographies. Writing the self, however, is a problematic project and especially for women.

Many feminist theorists have noted an urgency for women to speak and write about themselves in order to overcome paranoiac and hysterical silence. However, according to Simone de Beauvoir, the autobiographer "wholly occupied with burning incense to herself" is merely "burning incense to a nonentity":

The narcissist who identifies herself with her imaginary double destroys herself. [...] There can be no real relation between an individual and her double because this double does not exist. The narcissist encounters a fundamental frustration. She cannot envisage herself as a totality, she is unable to keep up the illusion of being *pour-soi - en-soi*. Her isolation, like that of every human being, is felt as contingency and forlorn abandonment.  
de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1972, p.651.

The danger she suggests is that this individual, having lost a sense of independence, now lays herself on the altar of public opinion and this can be damaging for the psychologically vulnerable. Obsessional neuroses, and particularly paranoia, are now free to enter the arena in order to shape, define and distort that image of the self which is in production and which is becoming public property. Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "burning incense to a non-entity," however, is a long way from Cixous' theses in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) and "Sorties" (1975) where she is constantly urging women to write themselves, in order to reclaim their bodies and appropriate language for themselves.

Of course there are problems here relating to notions of essentialism and the idea of a *true* female identity, but in women's autobiographical writing we might also ask if the sense of identity created is more authentic because of an autonomous self-construction as opposed to a passive construction and definition by others. If, as part of a feminist project, a woman means



to establish herself as 'I' rather than 'other', can we then perceive the objectification of the subject within autobiographical narratives as positive?

Recently the genre of autobiography, and definitions of it, have become of great interest to critics. In *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987), Sidonie Smith explains that more modern criticism has been less interested in testing the "truth" of the narrative by referring to biographical/historical facts and more concerned with problems of self-representation:

Since autobiography is understood to be a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an "identity" out of amorphous subjectivity, the critic becomes a psychoanalyst of sorts, interpreting the truth of an autobiography in its psychological dimensions rather than in its factual and moral ones.  
Smith: 1987, p.5.

The latest wave of criticism, a third mode, coming out of structuralism and post-structuralism questions both the referentiality and the fixity of the "informing 'I'":

The autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence, or identity, that does not exist outside language. Given the very nature of language, embedded in the text lie alternative or deferred identities that constantly subvert any pretensions of truthfulness.  
Smith: 1987, p.5.

Critics such as Smith and Laura Marcus argue that an unavoidable fictionality will be born out of any attempt to write the self, that there is no essential discrete self which can be materialised through a text. The very fragments of existence brought together in one text have to be a fictionalisation of the self. Writing the self, it seems, can result in an illusory sense of discrete wholeness, a unified self, or can reveal a fragmentary and incoherent nature of selfhood. Also, as Susan Friedman points out all autobiography is 'necessarily fictive'; all stories of the self, all "I"s are fictions:

The failures of Narcissus and Oedipus prefigure the impossible task of the autobiographer to reach a 'real self'. All autobiography is 'necessarily fictive'; it reveals a self whose very coherence is the sign of its falseness and alienation.  
Friedman in Benstock: 1988. p 37.

Janet Frame explains that the nature of memory and time will always undermine the notion that pure autobiography can exist in her autobiography *To the Is-Land: An Autobiography*

(1983):

Where in my earlier years time had been horizontal, progressive, day by day, year after year, with memories being a true personal history known by dates and specific years, or vertical, with events stacked one upon the other, [...] the adolescent time now became a whirlpool, and so the memories do not arrange themselves to be observed and written about, they whirl, propelled by a force beneath, with different memories rising to the surface at different times and thus denying the existence of a "pure" autobiography and confirming, for each moment, a separate story accumulating to a million stories, all different and with some memories forever staying beneath the surface.  
Frame: 1983, p.236

In her second volume *An Angel at My Table* (1984) Frame draws attention to the necessity of crafting an aesthetics of the 'truth' about the self and explains that this artfulness is related to the non-linearity of time:

Writing an autobiography, usually thought of as a looking back, can just as well be a looking *across* or *through*, with the passing of time giving an x-ray quality to the eye. Also, time past is not time gone, it is time accumulated with the host resembling the character in the fairytale who was joined along the route by more and more characters none of whom could be separated from one another or from the host, with some stuck so fast that their presence caused physical pain. Add to the characters all the events, thoughts, feelings, and there is a mass of time, now a sticky mess, now a jewel bigger than the planets and the sun.  
Frame: 1993, p.67.

Time confers privileges of arrangement and rearrangement undreamed of until it becomes Time past. I have been writing of the memory of publication of stories and poems. In actual memory I am sitting talking to two Borstal girls, on the way to Seacliffe Hospital where I shall be a committed patient.  
Frame: 1993, p.68.

We will explore the themes of time and memory, and how these affect the writing of autobiography, in more depth later. We will also encounter many fictionalisations of the self when we consider the work of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Janet Frame is also a significant figure, not only because she writes about her treatment for schizophrenia in autobiographical and fictional form, but also because she highlights the importance of diagnosis and performativity. In *An Angel at my Table*, Frame gives us an account of wrongful diagnosis and her subsequent acting-out of madness which resulted in a horrific and prolonged incarceration which robbed her of a large part of her youth. Frame's tragic embrace of the fictions surrounding women in relation to madness is a poignant reminder of the danger of gender performance. However, her autobiography and her novel *Faces in the Water* (1961)

are also valuable gifts wrought out of an aesthetic production and performance of her own life experience.

In Frame's final autobiographical volume *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985) she explains that in her novel *Faces* (1961) she wrote a story and a central character based on her own experiences but necessarily, whilst writing from memory, experience must be modified in order to create fiction:

I began to write the story of my experiences in hospitals in New Zealand, recording faithfully every happening and the patients and the staff I had known, but borrowing from what I had observed among the patients to build a more credibly 'mad' character, Istina Mavet, the narrator.  
Frame: 1993, p.132.

Whilst Frame understood that critics would assume that Istina Mavet was a portrait of herself, she also asserts an authority which defends the autonomy of aesthetic production:

a writer must stand on the rock of her self and her judgement or be swept away by the tide or sink in the quaking earth: there must be an inviolate place where the choices and decisions, however imperfect, are the writer's own, where the decision must be as individual and solitary as birth or death. What was the use of my having survived as a person if I could not maintain my own judgement? Only then could I have the confidence to try to shape a novel or story or poem the way I desired and needed it to be, with both the imperfections and the felicities bearing my own signature.  
Frame: 1993, pp.138-139.

There are many questions to be raised regarding the relationship between fiction and autobiography. For Frame learning to write autobiography is inextricably linked to fiction; it is learning to be "a citizen of the Mirror City":

My only qualification for continuing to write this autobiography is that although I have used, invented, mixed, remodelled, changed, add, subtracted from all experiences I have never written directly of my own life and feelings. Undoubtedly I have mixed myself with other characters who themselves are a product of known and unknown, real and imagined; I have created 'selves'; but I have never written of 'me'. Why? Because if I make that hazardous journey to the Mirror City where everything I have known or seen or dreamed of is bathed in the light of another world, what use is there in returning only with a mirrorful of me? Or, indeed, of others who exist very well by the ordinary light of day? The self must be the container of the treasures of Mirror City, the Envoy as it were, and when the time comes to arrange and list those treasures for shaping into words, the self must be the worker, the bearer of the burden, the chooser, placer and polisher.  
Frame: 1993, pp.154-155.

Frame does not apologise for indulging her memory because memory is a treasure, it has the power to transform ordinary facts and ideas "into a shining palace of mirrors" (Frame: 1993, p.190). Certainly this collection of writing from Frame has provided women with an insightful

journey into the relationship between women, madness and language.

This brings us back to my earlier questions regarding the existence of an essential, autonomous self as opposed to one which is passively constructed. Is writing the self an artifice by which means we can take possession of a real / true being? Is there an inherent self behind my performing masks? Do I meet myself in the mirror? Another recent question raised by Nicole Ward Jouve might be: Who is the critic self? Jouve blurs the boundaries between academic and autobiographical language and adopts an approach to autobiography which is relevant to our purposes here. In *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (1991) the author begins by situating herself as a white middle class, bilingual, woman whose writing practice includes criticism, feminist theory, fiction, creative writing and here as a writer who will give autobiographical responses to authors and their texts. Jouve explains that she is "in search of a different voice, a more inclusive and exploratory way of writing about literature, or women's issues" (Jouve: 1991, p. ix ). Although there is a mass of critical writing on autobiography which claims that "through writing the self is invented, constructed, projected," few critics seem unaware "that they themselves, through writing, may be in the process of inventing or projecting their own selves" (Jouve: 1991, p.1). Their objective surveillance of "the common herd of writers" removes them "from the obligation of having to bother with the self that writes. They inhabit a secure, objective, third-person mode that protects them from having to be self-aware" (Jouve: 1991, p.1). Jouve questions the notion of transcendent and "transparent objectivity" for, in order for critical writing to be committed, Jouve suggests that the critic needs to be self-reflexive about the processes involved in her critique: "Only when it actually thinks is criticism ever a form of writing. Only then is it a total commitment to language" (Jouve: 1991, p.2). But Jouve's intention is not to impose her ego and splash it "all over the page," this is an experiment in something different which I believe is useful and significant for women who write about women's writing:

If all criticism became autobiography, it would not only become boring, it would defeat its purpose. Criticism is about the other. Its drive for an objective voice is a search for a consensual voice and an attempt at openness. Let the ego be quiet so that the other can be seen. The drive is for the absolute. However relativistic, however studded with 'seems' or aware of rival positions the critical discourse may be, it aims at truth - in the Thomist sense, as the adequation of mind to the thing. Criticism that would be primarily preoccupied with self would be narcissistic. [...] Literary criticism in any case is better deployed when it is self-forgetful. Its business is indeed to read between the lines, to detect the personal where it lurks among the other elements at play in the text.

Jouve: 1991, pp. 5-6.

Jouve asks if writing about autobiography might mask a desire to write oneself. She likens critics to mirrors saying that they are in the business of reflecting backwards and forwards between themselves, their responses, and the work of art. However, critics avoid confession and with-hold the risky "I" in order to uphold the pretence of a valid polemical reading, an attack perhaps, which is more persuasive written at a distance. I am interested in the questions which Jouve raises because my recent readings of Woolf and Plath have been influenced by critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Hermione Lee who have not been afraid to say "I" in their writing. Their 'confessional' analyses have encouraged me to access a more self-conscious approach to texts and have instigated an exploration on my part of the relationship which has developed between myself, these writers and their texts.

Are all my readings necessarily linked to my own experiences? If so, is critical analysis a form of autobiography? A later question will be whether writing the self provides a useful reflection for women and ultimately I have to ask myself how writing about those who have written autobiographically could be helpful in terms of feminism.

Paul De Man claimed that there existed an unavoidable and "universal crisis in language" in the late sixties. The fictionality of the self is one problem but Paul de Man's influential essay "Autobiography as Defacement" (1970) further unsettles the notion that a self can be written:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine that life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?  
de Man in Eakin: 1985, p. 185.

The movement from text to knowledge of the self is also illusion according to de Man. But, some feminist writers wanted to see a reversal of de Man's analysis in the late nineteen-eighties. They call for a return to subjecthood, and Jouve suggests that, above all, we need to be in touch with ourselves and with others in order to call things into question and in order to keep critical engagement alive (Jouve: 1991, pp.11-12). Notions of subjectivity are problematic within contemporary theory but autobiography also has a generically problematic existence. Jouve asks:

Is it a form? Is it content? a mixed genre? an inferior genre? necessarily ruptured and discontinuous? Does it involve a contract with the name of the author? Is it meant to make a fallacious whole of the disparate elements of the personality? to separate, or to connect, private and public self? How can you so glibly assume that by saying 'I' you will somehow make everything add up?  
Jouve: 1991, p.10.

As I began to investigate autobiographical writing across many forms the following questions seemed to be relevant: If autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects her own image then is autobiographical writing/reading part of an inner looking narcissistic project on the part of the author and a voyeuristic pursuit on the part of the reader? Or, more positively, can writing and reading about female life experience be regarded as part of more outward looking practices which further the political projects relating to feminism ? Does the fictionalisation of life experience threaten the existence of a discrete and self-contained identity? Is there a danger that in becoming the authors of our own lives, constructing ourselves through fiction, we lose a sense of self-knowledge by becoming an intrinsic part of our own aesthetic creation? Jouve suggests that there are problems when one becomes the object or the subject of a text but dismisses any kind of faint-hearted avoidance:

It is not because consciousness can never be full, never be more than fragments or a patchwork. that the enterprise is fallacious.

Indeed, it is because subjecthood has become so difficult, has been so deconstructed, that there is need to work towards it. This is particularly so for women. It has often been pointed out in recent years that women's autobiographies carry a sense of their being somehow 'unfinished' human beings. The awareness of being 'different', pain arising from that sense of being as related to, let alone symbolic of, the world at large.

Jouve: 1991, 10 - 11.

In order to write about one's personal life experience one has to perceive the self as other, the subject, then, becomes objectified. The process of crafting in poetry and prose enables the subject to become a separate thing, an artefact, something which can be edited, shaped, changed, tampered with. In this kind of story-telling the self becomes far more objectified than in the immediacy of subjective oral narratives. Although we do shape and edit our spoken stories, we silence ourselves or fill in gaps, we do not have the time, space or opportunity to offer the last version from a pile of multiple drafts.

Doris Lessing explains in her autobiography, *Under my Skin* (1994), that telling the truth and deciding how much or how little to tell is the first problem one has to face when one decides to write about one's life (Lessing: 1995, p.11). However, the decisions about omissions or inclusions are less problematic than the problem of changing perceptions, for memories and judgements alter with time:

Telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the landscape changes with every turn in the path. Had I written this when I was thirty, it would have been a pretty combative document. In my forties, a wail of despair and guilt: oh my God, how could I have done this or that? Now I look back at that child, that girl, that young woman, with a more detached curiosity. [...] I try to see my past selves as someone else might, and then put myself back inside one of them, and am at once submerged in a hot struggle of emotion, justified by thoughts and ideas I now judge wrong.  
Lessing: 1995, p.12.

What is particularly of interest here is the sense that Lessing comes out of herself to see herself as others do, but then re-inhabits that objectified self only to find herself, once more, swamped by subjective emotions. In the second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade* (1997), Lessing explains that she has discovered that the trick of memory is to tidy up and simplify one's life experiences (Lessing: 1997, p.327). Again we are faced with the notion that coherence is only possible when one has edited out, at least in part, the multiplicity of existence.

In Sean Burke's Reader *Authorship from Plato to the Postmodern* (1995) the uneasy

relationship between author, subject and self are examined. Burke explains that the act of authorship is an exercise in "self-deflection" or "the creation of an aesthetic identity which seeks to transcend or negate the biographical subject" (Burke: 1995, p.303). Particularly in autobiography the problems related to the aesthetics of subjectivity are compounded by "the absence of an ostensible narrator or a poetic speaker through which agency the author is distanced from the subject of representation" (Burke: 1995, p.304). Burke's introduction raises a number of questions which will be useful to us in our exploration of women's autobiography:

When an author writes or thinks to be writing, is that author simultaneously written? Does creative imagination guide the composition, or is the writer like the scrawl of an alien power trying out a new pen? Are the 'great authors' masters in the house of language, or its privileged tenants? Is the author the producer or its product? Do we speak language or does language speak us? Does the author reflect culture and history, or is the author constructed in culture and history?

Burke: 1995, p.xv.

Here we seem to come upon another question regarding a woman's desire to become the author of her own life: would this practice constitute a contradiction of the notions in Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1968)? Does autobiography undermine the birth of the reader and remove the text from a primary position? Challenges to the concept of a speaking subject and the belief in language's transparency have called into question Western epistemological metanarratives including autobiography. Now the emphasis is on the text and the reader. This is further complicated when we consider that the reader too is only a subject in process, always only a product of language. As Smith points out, if there is no stable self, then, there is no actual reader. The writer tells "a story" rather than "the" story and the reader is complicit in this presentation:

Trying to tell the story she wants to tell about herself, she is seduced into a tantalizing and yet elusive adventure that makes her both the creator and creation, writer and what is written about. The very language she uses to name herself is simultaneously empowering and vitiating since words cannot capture the full sense of being and narratives explode in multiple directions on their own.

Smith: 1987, p.46.

There is a less fluid contract between the reader and writer of autobiography than that between the reader and the fiction writer. There is some expectation of truth, that a person is



struggling with their own history, a real past. As we move towards the writing of Woolf and Plath we will see that writers themselves struggle with the nature of memory and its impact on writing the self. In Woolf's memoirs, for example, we have an explicit expression of self-reflexivity which confesses to the omissions, inclusions and ordering which will necessarily alter what masquerades as a true story of the past. In terms of form and style, Plath experiments with different genre and the same story can be read through very different texts. In this way Plath self-consciously sought to justify herself and create order through writing. For Plath, then, using autobiographical material in fiction and poetry was a means of undoing a schizophrenic splitting of the subject.

Performativity, therefore becomes a key term when we consider these autobiographical writings:

Involved in a kind of masquerade, the autobiographer creates an iconic representation of continuous identity that stands for, or rather before, her subjectivity as she tells of this "I" rather than that "I." She may even create several, sometimes competing stories about or versions of herself as her subjectivity is displaced by one or multiple textual representations. The doubling of the "self" into a narrating "I" and a narrated "I" and, further, the fracturing of the narrated "I" into multiple speaking postures mark the autobiographical process as rhetorical artefact and the authorial signature as mythography.  
Smith: 1987, p. 47.

The "I" becomes no longer "familiar" but "foreign" and "the drift of the disappropriation, the shape, that is, that the autobiographer's narrative and dramatic strategies take, reveals more about the autobiographer's present experience of "self" than about her past" and this is related to cultural ideologies and notions of selfhood: "self-interpretation emerges rhetorically from the autobiographer's engagement with the fictive stories of selfhood" (Smith: 1987, p.47).

The female autobiographer is therefore responding to multiple readers, both masculine and feminine, and their expectations. She needs to negotiate the reader's desire and expectation, she needs to create strategies and she is always self-conscious and self-reflexive, because she knows that she is writing/speaking into an andocentric culture and literary tradition. The reader needs to be aware of the interestedness of the author, the author needs to

be aware of his/her responsibility to own his/her desires. A will-to-impersonality is thus seen as a defensive mechanism. Burke explains his discomfort with recent post-structuralist theory (in Derrida for example) and outlines some interesting notions which, to a certain extent, echo my own; he suggests that a recognition of particularity and situatedness requires a stance that is not impersonal or disinterested; authorship must therefore be repositioned "as a situated activity present not so much to itself as to culture, ideology, language, difference, influence, biography" (Burke: 1995, p.xxxvi).

There are some questions to be raised here regarding women's problematic access to language and cultural institutions and how a restricted access then relates to women's sense of self both culturally and historically. Lacan, as we have seen, held that the unconscious is created at the same time as language is acquired; the naming of objects is related to social interaction and is motivated by the child's sense of loss and powerlessness during the separation stage. Acquisition of language, development of self-awareness and representational thought occurs therefore when the child is aware of itself as both subject and object. Conscious self-reflexivity depends upon language and the imagination, therefore human development has a direct correlation to the relationship between subjectivity and language acquisition. The self in this regard is an emergent rather than a given entity. If women's access to language, particularly within the public sphere, is limited then our emergent selves will also be stunted.

Does the writing of female experience through autobiography or fiction have the potential to change lives? When these stories become public property can they be appropriated and inhabited by other subjects who have not found the means to articulate what is recognizable as female experience and consciousness? Can the metaphors and symbols can become ours? Does reading female autobiography give women access to a new language?

Once a life experience has been told as a story, verbalised or written down, it is objectified

and as such the self can be partially unified through form. As Foucault points out in "What is Enlightenment?" (1984) the concept of the self as an aesthetic artefact is hardly new and certainly not limited to literary experience. We are not free to wander within and explore a pre-existent but unknown self but are forced to consider and undertake the task of self-production. I believe this is particularly interesting from a feminist perspective as the writing of female experience through autobiography or fiction does have the potential to change lives. When these stories become public property they become about "everywoman". Writing a woman's life is of crucial importance and through women's autobiographical writing the private and the personal have become political.

### **Feminist Responses**

Despite the fact that women's autobiography has only recently been accepted into the literary canon as a distinct and important genre, women have always told stories to one another and clearly there is a long tradition of writing the self in diary and letter form. These private and semi-private modes of representation have long existed for women but my interest is also related to the implications of public production and publication of life stories in many forms. Plath and Woolf seemed apt subjects due to their position as cultural icons. In my subsequent reading of the above writers we have to address the relationship between author, subject/object and text. In Foucault's essay "What is an author?" he states his indifference towards the speaker: "what difference does it make who is speaking?" The emphasis is not on the disappearance or absence of the author but rather on "the space left empty by the author's disappearance." We should not only try to locate this space but also "follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (Rabinow, 1987, pp.101-120). It is these fissures, these silences between the echoings and reverberations of texts which I want to investigate. The reading of autobiography and fiction based on life

experience means that the question "Who spoke?" is immediately answered with nothing more than a name for a negotiation of the multiple selves which are represented means that we cannot discover a discrete identity behind the texts. As Shari Benstock claims: "Autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction"

(Benstock: 1988, p.11). If this is the case when authors attempt to write the self then how much more impossible is it for the reader to reach a knowledge of the self behind the text?

Although my research into psychoanalytical and linguistic theories relating to women and the body, women and language and the relation of these theories to notions of madness (paranoia, schizophrenia and narcissism) have been invaluable, these theories are employed in my literary analyses in an eclectic manner. Rather than impose pathological readings onto the texts I have explored, I have been more concerned to look at the differences in the language used to express life experience, the modes of expression and how they might be related to a sense of audience and generic form. So whilst it may be tempting to offer diagnostical readings which relate to the biographical details of an author's life, my interest is to look at the language used to describe that life experience rather than to offer labels from psycho-analytical terminology. As Hermione Lee in her recent biography of Woolf suggests, naming "illnesses" can so often limit our reading.

The movement between subject and object, private and public as well as women's problematic relationship with the body and language leads to a fragmented and displaced notion of selfhood when women embark upon the project of writing the self. The ensuing splitting of the subject may account for what many critics have assumed is a schizophrenic, narcissistic or paranoid tendency within these writers' psyches. I would argue that this is merely side-stepping the issue. The problem which must be addressed is much larger than this, that problem is inextricably bound to the nature of self-representation, especially for women.

Kristeva's discussion of foreignness in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988) could be of some use here as she seems to suggest that the links between primary narcissism, paranoia and schizophrenia can be broken when the subject recognizes that his/her difference and separateness is not only external but also internal, that we have a foreigner within. The other is experienced as strange, dangerous or unpleasant because it constitutes the part of the self which has been rejected and projected outwards. Production and recognition of the alien, then becomes a defence mechanism:

In this instance the strange appears as a defence put up by a distraught self: it protects itself by substituting for the image of a benevolent double that used to be enough to shelter it from the image of a malevolent double into which it expels the share of destruction it cannot contain.  
Kristeva: 1991, p183.

A difficulty arises when during this process of discovering our multiplicity and playing out the emergent split identities we are in danger of being considered mad:

Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking ...  
Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves without being considered mad or fake?  
Kristeva: 1991, pp.13-14.

One has to address the notion of an obvious dispersal of the self as it is represented by multiple generic productions. Kristeva suggests that language is used as defence against the abjection of the female body; language becomes the screen defending the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, as well as the mirror within which the repressed can be framed and reflected in some discrete form.

However, a woman's access to language is not an easy one, as we have seen. Referring to our earlier quote from Carolyn Burke, we either find ourselves speaking in what seems like a foreign tongue which makes us uncomfortable or we become complicit in our assimilation of a dominant masculine discourse. Those who speak from the margins, from what Sidonie Smith terms "a negative position in culture," are bound to reveal "the tensions between consciousness and the social world" (Smith: 1987, p.4). Many feminist critics have recently

been working to retrieve and collect those voices (20).

Julia Swindells begins her introduction to *The Uses of Autobiography* (1994) with the comment: "The orthodox version of the Western European autobiographical tradition displays Roland Barthes as the Twentieth Century apotheosis, and variously St Augustine or Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the revered head of the tradition" (Swindells: 1994, p.1). Beginning with Barthes' confident affirmation "I myself am my own symbol" from *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes* (1977), Swindells explains that she aims to examine the issues raised by such a statement regarding "the entire tradition [of autobiography] and the process of its construction" (Swindells: 1994, p1). Swindells welcomes recent commentary which questions the notion that "autobiography is a naked and transparent presentation of existence" and which underlines the "process of mediation between the subject and author of the autobiography, and the ideological environment they inhabit." Thus the "autobiographical act" is not always read as an isolated "testimony to individuals, removed from their relationship to the social world" (Swindells: 1994, p.1). However, Swindells also finds problematic an autobiographer's claim that either due to full integration he (Swindells here is referring specifically to male autobiographers) can offer an authoritative and perfect example of "the model relationship between the individual and the social world" or otherwise "via a transcendent selfhood" his superior position would allow him to produce a reflection of his "ideological domain" (Swindells: 1994, p.2). Thus the autobiographer speaks for all, the relationship between his consciousness and the environment serves as a model for the relationship of an "everyman" consciousness to the world which it inhabits. The normalizing effect of this, as Swindells suggests, means that any conflict between people and their ideological milieu is neglected.

I think it would be useful here to explore a little the traditional male genre to see how these masculine autobiographies may differ in purpose to a female project of writing the self. The most formative male autobiographical writing can be found in the *Confessions* of Saint

Augustine (Bishop of Hippo, 397 A.D) and those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1781). Saint Augustine's *Confessions* reveal that the author's purpose is not to merely tell a story about his life, but to direct others towards the church; he writes an episodic autobiography of his sins only to emphasize God's grace. This work directs the reader away from the author and so employs the impersonal third person in order to persuade and encourage others to follow his lead and seek for themselves the grace of God. For Rousseau, the self is the subject of the discourse. His aim is not to glorify God but to provide the truth about himself by revealing himself *in all his completeness* to the gaze of the reader. Rousseau's work reveals an insistence on difference rather than universality. His appeal is related to a celebration of autonomy and individuality, which in turn signals that we are all unique, that we all have our own individual histories, memories and perceptions.

Whilst Rousseau's secular writing might reveal some similarities to women's autobiographies in terms of trying to create a "self" in order to define himself to himself and to others, it is his emphasis on an isolated inner self which makes his purpose different from that of many female autobiographers. However, similar to Lessing's description of the process of writing autobiography, Rousseau creates a separate self, an object which can be examined and judged and constantly draws attention to the fictionality of his self-portrait, which suggests that the self presented is indeed a construct, a fabrication of his own imagination.

Autobiography can be useful to a feminist project but in order to be effective the genre must move away from individualism and isolation in order to promote social and political change. Swindells wishes to move beyond individual life stories and to promote "the use of autobiography as part of a political strategy to produce change" (Swindells: 1994, p.205). Collective editions of previously silenced voices lead to the emergence of the notion and the familiar slogan that "the personal is political." A public voicing of women's dissatisfaction seemed to make more achievable the possibility of political action and therefore change. The

discovery that women's experiences as mothers and daughters were often not positive due to societal expectations had revolutionary potential. Also these works encouraged more women to speak and write and to reconsider the value of their narratives. Formerly they had considered that what they had to say about their lives was unimportant because of the triviality of daily experiences and although women have long been writing diaries, letters and journals, these forms of writing usually remain private.

Susan Friedman suggests that it is women's alienation which motivates the writing of autobiography, that its writing can be a positive step towards the formation of a group identity, a solidarity, and a collective consciousness: "Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech" (Friedman in Benstock: 1988, p.41). She points towards Chodorow's notion that a feminine sense of self is a sense of connectedness and community. Nancy Chodorow's groundbreaking work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) develops a theory which explains the difference between male and female identity and the process of individuation. She claims that the female child is less likely to experience the same degree of separation and disconnection from the pre-Oedipal attachments within the family as the male child, her individuality is then not as keenly desired nor felt. The female child nevertheless becomes marginalized because the male child enters into the public domain and the dominant discourse of the fathers; therefore the male experience is considered to be the normative and is the dominant human paradigm:

From this ideological perspective the girl comes to speak tentatively from outside the prevailing framework of individuality: She brings a different kind of voice to her narrative. To be sure, the difference in experience is culturally rather than biologically based, reproduced by the familial and cultural structures of power constitutive of patriarchy.

Smith: 1987, p. 12-13.

Because women's "psychosexual development" differs it follows that her texts will also signal a different relationship to representation therefore we cannot be satisfied with those theories



which do not take account of women's sense of connectedness to others and the effect that this would have on identity and therefore self-representation. Nevertheless, we need to address any underlying assumptions about writing and sexual difference, about genre and gender, about the intersection between ideologies of male and female selfhood (21).

Although patriarchal psycho-analytical discourses prioritise separation over relatedness in order for the subject to achieve autonomy and maturity, feminists have to take issue with this notion without somehow becoming enmeshed in other traditional patriarchal ideologies which would keep women shut away in the bedroom, the nursery and the kitchen because of our "relational" role in society. I would argue that the notion of connectedness, relationality and community is a key and recurring issue within feminism, that a recognition of the centrality of this is perhaps the only way forward for women. Women's stories may challenge the dominant culture and yet many critics of autobiography have remained indifferent to the importance of sexual difference and the language of female experience. Donna C. Stanton points out the disjunction created by the absence of women's texts in discussions about autobiography and suggests the possibility that a female tradition has been usurped. The hierarchical critical valuations claim that the male text is "crafted and aesthetic" and that the female text is "spontaneous, natural." These notions seem "to affirm that women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self." Therefore the description "autobiographical" actually becomes a "weapon to denigrate female texts and exclude them from the canon" (Stanton in Smith: 1987, p.16).

Smith is concerned that, although consideration has been given to women's autobiography in relation to women's biological experience, there is very little which takes consideration of the issues of women's identity, and textuality - her writing and reading practices. Gender has only recently become a focus of critical evaluations of life writing. Smith points out that women's marginalization both in terms of her limited access to public space and her

problematic relation to speech has "either condemned her to public silence or profoundly contaminated her relationship to the pen as an instrument of power" (Smith: 1987, p.7). Patriarchal definitions of women's nature and her prescribed roles are therefore transgressed if she attempts to give in to the desire to speak in her own voice. Also, in terms of representation, women's life stories are unlikely to fulfil the traditional criteria due to her lack of standing in the public eye; a notable "eminent" woman who may achieve such status is therefore an exception and would not be representative of her social milieu or times. Her voice, then, either becomes part of the master narrative or else women's unexceptional life stories remain unheard because of their inferior, narrow experience. We shall see that Plath constantly battled with the notion that she had nothing noteworthy to write about.

Feminist literary theorists, such as Smith, have recently deconstructed "the patriarchal hegemony of literary history, poetics, and aesthetics" and reconstructed a different perspective (Smith: 1987, p.17). By taking into account the significance of gender, by exploring history and genre, theories of women's autobiography are beginning to take shape:

Going beyond the adaptation of androcentric historiography and poetics, the theories are grounded in a variety of feminocentric phenomena. The most conservative and the earliest to emerge argues that the specificity of women's autobiography comes from thematic content, determined by women's subordinate and prescribed status in patriarchal culture. Instead of adventures and vocations, of existential angst and alienation, women write about the sphere of domesticity [...] But the recourse to a binarism that reifies the public-private opposition eventuates in a simplistic and unsatisfactory description of textual difference.

Smith: 1987, p.17.

Smith distinguishes this critique of content with that of form which seems to link experience to style rather than consider the intrinsic nature of the genre:

Other theories of difference have distinguished women's autobiographical writing as fragmentary and discontinuous, a narrative mode imitative of their actual experience as daughter, wife, and mother responsive emotionally to the myriad pressures of another's needs [...] such theories of fragmentation and discontinuity ignore the nature of autobiographical practice ... the generic contract engages the autobiographer in a doubled subjectivity - the autobiographer as protagonist of her story and

autobiographer as narrator. Through that doubled subjectivity she pursues her fictions of selfhood by fits and starts.

Smith: 1987, pp.17-18.

Within my own writing on autobiography I have attempted to address the issue that the importance of form and style is equal to content when women write about their lives.

Whilst the autobiographer "unmasks her transgressive desire for cultural and literary authority" she also has to negotiate fictions about subjectivity, she is not a man and she is not the woman she is supposed to be, so woman has no autobiographical self in the sense that man does, she has been erased and should be self-effacing (Smith: 1987, p.51). The female autobiographer is thus removed from the centre of power and discourse and speaks/writes from a marginal position crossing many other stories already told about her: she is trespassing, she is an interloper. If the female autobiographer is successful in the public arena, is this because she is still telling a story about the centrality of male dominance? In terms of Julia Kristeva's notion of the law of the father we must ask whether the daughter needs to raise herself to his stature in order to be deemed worthy. Must she embrace the myths of patriarchy in order to assume that she has a right to speak? And if she does so, is she not complicit in silencing the mother, denying the maternal? Will she capitulate or accept marginalisation because she is deemed unfeminine? Either way she will not be deemed an ideal woman, and will still have to face an almost inevitable rejection because her story is probably not worth telling and, of course, women who do tell their stories are only giving in to a natural female bent towards narcissism. Smith ends her work on a more positive note regarding Twentieth Century life narratives saying that female autobiographers are more conscious of their position as women and less concerned to embrace a masculine mode of selfhood. The modern writer engages with the fictions of a dominant discourse and finds herself empowered within the very system which would silence her:

She greets, identifies with, rebels against, cannibalizes, and ultimately transforms public forms of selfhood. Cannibalizing the forms of selfhood embedded in the ideology of gender, she turns the female "self" and female storytelling into some amalgam, something neither conventionally male nor female, some energizing mutation played on autobiographical possibilities. Fashioning her own voice within and against the voices of others, she performs a selective appropriation of stories told by and about men and women. Subversively, she rearranges the dominant discourse and the dominant ideology of gender, seizing the language and its powers to turn cultural fictions into her very own story. Sometimes, in the wonderful ingeniousness of her effort, she performs a critical unravelling of the hegemonic figures of selfhood. Always she ends up creating herself once again in a medium that will hold her forever still but not silenced.

In that creative gesture, woman speaks to her culture from the margins. While margins have their limitations, they also have their advantages of vision. They are polyvocal, more distant from the centers of power and conventions of selfhood. They are heretical.

Smith: 1987, p.175-176.

Female autobiography may still be eccentric but, as we shall see in the following chapters, it is very much alive.

## Notes

- (1) Some studies show that asylums in Britain and abroad were largely populated by an equal number of male and female patients (*Anatomy of Madness: Institutions and Society Vol.2* - see Charlotte MacKenzie's figures in "Social factors in the admission, discharge, and continuing stay of patients at Ticehurst Asylum, 1845-1917" (pp. 147-174). Also, as Martin Stone points out, the shell shock victims of World War One had a great impact on British psychiatry in the 1920s and 1930s and the hysterical symptoms and neuroses generally connected to female behaviours were found to be affecting thousands of men forced to return from the front-line trenches in France due to severe mental breakdown. Many British doctors at the time felt that "shellshock had effectively 'disproved' Freud's theory of sexuality" (Stone in Bynum, Porter & Shepherd: 1985, p.245). See also the social construction of shell shock in Martin Stone, *Anatomy of Madness Vol. 2*, "Shellshock and the Psychologists", pp.242-271. I will investigate more fully these concepts in relation to Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* alongside Woolf's comments on war, masculinity and madness.
- (2) See Laing's texts *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1959) and *The Self and Others* (1961).
- (3) In *The Social Construction of What?* (1999) Ian Hacking considers the tension between "real" and "constructed" notions of madness, a tension which is the result of an interaction between the two. Hacking explains that within psychopathology, "the very habitus of mind and body," diagnosis based on biological and social causes constantly confront one another (see Hacking: 1999, pp.100-124).
- (4) Freud's 'Case of Dora', see "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (1901, 1905). Volume 7, Standard Edition.
- (5) This is the passage which Woolf takes issue with in *A Room Of One's Own* (1929). Woolf notes the jarring effect of Grace Poole's laughter and considers that Brontë was airing some "personal Grievance" (Woolf: 1977, pp. 66-70).
- (6) All further references are taken from this edition.
- (7) See the effects of the rest cure on Virginia Woolf also in the next chapter.
- (8) In *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) by Breuer and Freud you can read other accounts of young women, such as 'Anna O', whose intellectual life was so restricted that they also suffered mental breakdown. However, from Freud's perspective this neurotic behaviour is a direct result of penis envy and an inability on the woman's part to accept the limitations of her sex. Volume 2, Standard Edition.
- (9) There is also the suggestion of former prisoners in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as well as similar recurring images of hanging. Offred's discovery that she is not the first woman to be incarcerated in her room, and the sense of a ghostly double, is a source of comfort to her throughout the novel.

- (10) In Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1979) we also find a denouement in which the heroine could be read as an embodiment of female madness. This heroine relinquishes all language and clothing and, in a kind of Shamanistic regression, and returns to nature in order to escape from oppressive patriarchal systems. Although the body language exhibited at the end of these texts is sufficient to silence the male oppressors of the heroines, these women are nevertheless acting out an embodiment of the stories which are told about feminine behaviour and, as Pearce and Mills argue in their marxist/feminist reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, an eventual return to the symbolic and a re-integration into society is necessary in order to reclaim articulation and a voice in the dominant sphere of existence if women are to make any kind of difference to their situation (Mills, Pearce et al.: 1989, pp. 220-224).
- (11) See also Susie Orbach's book *Hunger Strike: The Anorexic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (1986). London: Faber & Faber.
- (12) Wolf refers to Showalter's notion that the practice of electro-shock treatment is carried out as a kind of religious ritual and performed by "a priestly masculine figure." The process becomes a magical a rite of passage where the patient undergoes a "death and rebirth ceremony". The "'bad' crazy self" is killed off and a new "'good' self" is resurrected ( Showalter: 1987, p. 217). See also Janet Frame's description of ECT in the third volume of her autobiography *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985):
- I learned from studying the journals that ECT (Electric Shock or Convulsive Therapy) was commended as a means of provoking *fear* in the patient, the fear being as it were a *bonus*, and salutary - for the psychiatrist no doubt and not for the patient! Sitting there among the labelled bottled brains I ventured to hope for the quality of strength and vigilance in psychiatrists, their continued examination and testing of their humanity without which they might become political operators infected with the endemic virus of psychiatry, politics, and some other professions - belief in the self as God.  
Frame: 1993, p.118
- In *Faces in the Water* (1961), Frame's fictionalisation of her own treatment for schizophrenia, the narrator comments that fear itself leads patients into more madness (Frame: 1993, p. 23).
- (13) See Showalter: 1987, pp. 208-210 & 215-216.
- (14) Relevant Nietzsche texts here would be *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *Ecce Homo* (1889).
- (15) For a further outline of feminist responses to Foucault see Jana Sawicki "Foucault Feminism and Questions of Identity" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (1994), ed. Gary Gutting.
- (16) See a relevant fragment of Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (1784) in Waugh: 1992, pp.87-89.
- (17) All further references will be from this edition.
- (18) See in particular Fevvers and Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Nora and Dora in

*Wise Children* (1991).

- (19) Lucy Armitt, who reads this novel alongside Freud's writings on Dora, the uncanny and *Totem and Taboo* (1913), suggests that Francie's first response uncovers a second ghost; that of his and Margaret's child (the result of an incestuous coupling). Francie is not surprised at the existence of the hand but shocked that Margaret, his sister, has not kept it more carefully hidden (Armitt: 2000, p.210).
- (20) See Sidonie Smith in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987) and Estelle Jelinek *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (1986). Jelinek points out that most autobiographical theory has been founded on the readings of male texts and that this theory will not do when considering texts written by women.
- (21) This is a point which Patricia Waugh also makes: "Women's sense of identity is more likely, for psychological and cultural reasons, to consist of a more diffuse sense of the boundaries of self and their identity understood in relational and intersubjective terms" (Waugh: 1992, pp. 201-203).

## **Part Two: Reading**

### **Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath**



## Virginia Woolf: Writing a Woman's Life

An investigation of Woolf's writing would seem appropriate not only because she so often chooses for her subject the female condition but also because she continually raises questions about the existence, or non-existence, of an essential self. The passages I have selected for consideration are those wherein Woolf wishes to articulate the experiences of transcendence and immanence, to find expression for a sense of momentary non-being and "moments of being" and how these relate to the body. There is also a sense in which writing the body, or writing about the relationship between women and their bodies, belies an investigation of the self, a search for identity and a desire for unity whilst recognising the experience of fragmentation and multiple selves. Although we may feel that we have a clearer picture of who Woolf was or is to us now when we have read her across the multiple forms of her writing, it is the voice and what that voice is able to say through those various forms that I have attempted to analyse here. I have chosen the specific recurring themes of writing, art, imagination and reality, illness, constructions of femininity (the mirror, narcissism, patriarchal ideals and feminist responses), class and death; all of which were clearly specific preoccupations for Virginia Woolf and are expressed across the whole of her writing. But that word *whole* is immediately problematic, for even with a comprehensive reading of essays, letters, diaries, memoirs and fiction, there is a constant tension between unity and fragmentation. There is a marked difference in the language and purpose of the diary entries and letter writing, and reading both gives us a fuller picture of Woolf's writing practices; a fuller picture but in no sense a whole or completed one.

Woolf was deeply reticent and private in some respects, everything which was prepared for publication was carefully censored and shaped to form a kind of mask which would hide her identity. There is certainly a sense of masquerade even in her most intimate letters, and whilst

the diary and autobiographical writings might suggest a less guarded style and therefore a more voyeuristic insight for the reader, I would question this reading as being too simplistic. Woolf may have written things that she did not expect others to read and may have recorded as closely as she could her myriad impressions of everyday life without any explicit evidence of a thoughtful creation of shape. Nevertheless, however unpolished the language and punctuation may be in these 'private' texts, the voice certainly addresses an audience which often suggests a dislocated self, a self which may just be listening, but also a self which could be critical, punishing, wise - a self to whom she directs questions. Although in this sense Woolf becomes her own audience, there is not a sense of wholeness here and there is no easy singularity of Woolf "herself" for she had many selves both in the public and the private sphere.

Woolf was concerned to experiment with form in her non-fictional writings of the self as well as within her fictions:

There looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction.  
*A Writer's Diary*: 1978, pp. 31-32.

Within her diary we have many voices and these tell us that she was concerned, not only with its purpose, but also with how to write a diary, how to write a self or "a soul", how to express that interest in oneself without becoming self-absorbed (Lee: 1996, p.5). What is clear is that, for Woolf, life-writing was of central interest and importance and this is evident in her fiction, essays, and politics quite apart from the writing of diaries and memoirs. Whilst Woolf's desire was to create something as solid and formal as a building, when she came to write her most autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1925) she soon discovered that "words are more impalpable than bricks." Woolf was well aware that as soon as one tries to write "a whole vision, an entire conception" of an experience which had left a lasting impression in the

memory and reconstruct it in words, one would find that it "breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions" (1). I would suggest that this experience of fragmentation was of great interest to Woolf and is evident, not only in her thematic explorations within and about the novels, but throughout her writing in every form.

Let us consider initially Woolf's non-fictions of the self in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939). Here Woolf was concerned to address the problems of how to write a life and picks out isolated and specific scenes, memories from her early childhood, which are descriptions of her sensations, rather than of herself. She is "only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (*Moments*: 1976, p.67). She remembers the colours and sounds and the emotions felt, but she us tells that "one only remembers what is exceptional" because life is largely made up of the experience of "non-being," which she describes as "cotton wool" (*Moments*: 1976, p.69, p.71). The remembrances, which make themselves felt through this padding of everyday life, she describes as "sudden shocks" or "blows" and these serve as moments of "revelation" because following such an experience comes the need for explanation:

it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call my philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern; that we - I mean all human beings- are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.  
*Moments*: 1976, p.72.

What is interesting is that, although Woolf is concerned to make a wholeness out of and within a scene when describing an isolated memory, she later tells us that she will not try to make a whole out of the collection of memories, they are not shaped into a unified picture of her life.

The scenes, then, are still fragmented:

These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device - a means of summing up and making innumerable details visible in one concrete picture. Details there were; still, if I stopped to think, I could collect any number. But, whatever the reason may be, I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. Always a scene has arranged itself: representative; enduring. This confirms me in my instinctive notion: (it will not bear arguing about; it is irrational) the sensation that we are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; and at some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is, these scenes - for why do they survive undamaged year after year unless they are made of something comparatively permanent? Is this liability to scenes the origin of my writing impulse? Are other people scene makers? These are questions to which I have no answer. Perhaps sometime I will consider it more carefully. Obviously I have developed the faculty, because in all the writing I have done, I have almost always had to make a scene ...

*Moments*: 1976, p.122.

Jeanne Schulkind makes a distinction in her introduction to Woolf's posthumously published autobiographical writing, *Moments of Being* (1976), between the self of the material and social world, wherein she sees an "emphasis on change and continuity of personal identity," and the transcendent self which experiences these "moments of being":

the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole. Thus, just as the outer limits of the personality are blurred and unstable because of the responsiveness of the self to the forces of the present moment, so the boundaries of the inner self are vague and, at moments, non-existent. For Virginia Woolf, when the self merges with reality, all limits associated with the physical world cease to exist.

Schulkind in *Moments*: 1976, p.18.

Yet, within this collection of "diverse" autobiographical writings, Schulkind sees "a remarkable unity" (Schulkind in *Moments*: 1976, p.11). She suggests that "the fragments do arrange themselves into a meaningful order" despite the fact that they were written for different purposes and span a period of forty years. Conversely, John Mepham describes this writing as "unguarded, uncensored, and relatively uncontrolled" (Mepham: 1991, p.180). Yet he agrees that Woolf was trying to formulate at least a "coherent identity" through her story-telling, even when she questions the validity of her memories:

In this 'sketch', the writing is not so much designed to record or recall an already established history, as to attempt to create a coherent identity, by holding together in a pattern the various parts of herself, or different identities, that she feels are all authentically part of who she is. She wants to create a story that will bring these parts together into an intelligible whole. In particular the narrator is anxious to exhibit for us her will to write as a kind of unexplained oddity at the heart of her life. There are different possible ways of understanding the will to write. She prefers one particular life story, one way of making sense of it, but she cannot tell us with certainty that it is true.

Mepham: 1991, p.182.

Woolf's belief was that the ever changing shapes of the self, the flux and fluidity of

individual identity and the notion of its evidence throughout the external multiplicity of experience, as well as within relationships with others, altered the shape of the self. However, she seemed constantly to be looking for coherence through the creation of highly structured patterns in her writing. Woolf writes of the "immense forces" of "the invisible presences," such as class or the loss of one's mother, which affect the subject and that these must be taken into account if life-writing is not to become "futile": "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected, held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (*Moments*: 1976, p.80). That the self is both deviant and fixed (and presumably slippery, almost uncatchable) suggests immediately a multiplicity of being. In the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Woolf gives an account of how she gathered her ideas for the lecture she was to deliver to women students at Cambridge University. She finds herself by the banks of the river, fishing for thoughts:

Thought - to call it by a prouder name than it deserved - had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it until - you know the little tug - the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the curious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating.  
*A Room*: 1977, p.7.

Woolf's opening passage in "A Sketch" would indicate a passive approach: "without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself - or if not it will not matter - I begin: the first memory" (*Moments*: 1976, p.64). Also evident is Woolf's refusal to see herself as unified, in fact author and subject are very definitely distinct in the second passage, following the description of her first memory, the flowers on her mother's dress:

I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this very moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself.  
*Moments*: 1976, p.65.

Woolf's purpose was that the past and the present self should come out as two contrasting people, this fragmentation would suggest a denial of the possibility of unity (*Moments*: 1976,

p.75). I would argue that there is always a sense of self-conscious shaping in Woolf's scene making. Even if the existence of an impersonal tone might point towards a lack of self-awareness, this distancing process, wherein the author stands apart from or outside of the autobiographical episode is itself a highly self-reflexive literary device.

## Life and Fiction: Writing the Self

Let us now look at the relationship between Woolf's life-writing, and her fiction. Reading her memoirs (and other non-fiction - her diaries, letters and essays), it is clear that Woolf was concerned to incorporate her life experience and the people she knew into her fictional writing. The relationships between surface and depth, being and non-being were a constant pre-occupation both thematically and in terms of form, as we shall see when we come to *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) at the end of this section. Whilst I would perhaps argue with Schulkind's ideas about the imposition of unity within "A Sketch," I would agree, in part, with her penultimate closing statement in the introduction to *Moments of Being*:

But the material of the fiction, however directly it appears to have been taken from her life, was nevertheless subtly transmuted in the creative process. Bits of one individual or incident are not infrequently found mixed with bits of another, but more significantly, the meaning of the thing created, whether character or incident, is rigorously subordinated to the design of the novel which, once established, generated its own principles of harmony.

Schulkind in *Moments*: 1976, p.24.

That the meaning is "subordinated" to form is questionable. Perhaps form, to Woolf, is the very stage upon which meaning can parade itself and become visible. Maria de Battista describes Woolf's mode of authorship in terms of the theatrical devices of ventriloquy and soliloquy; she suggests that the relationship between these two modes, or voices, is central to the action within Woolf's fiction:

The dialogue between these two languages, the ventriloquist tethered to the present, the soliloquist anchored in the timeless realm of her own sensations and imaginings, is as much a part of the 'action' in a novel by Virginia Woolf as the giving of a party, the leap from a window, the journey to a lighthouse.

de Battista in Roe and Sellers: 2000, p. 138.

In fact when we consider Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway* and Mrs Ramsay and Lily in *To the Lighthouse* alongside what we know of Woolf's life experiences the notion of ventriloquy and soliloquy is particularly interesting in terms of the experience of embodiment and disembodiment encountered when life becomes art and the self is fictionalised.

John Mepham relates the "fantasy of disembodiment" in Woolf's fiction (Mrs Ramsay for example) to the traumas in Woolf's childhood; abuse and bereavement. Although I shall address the connections between a specific scene of abuse in "A Sketch" and Woolf's fictional writing of the mirror later, I would be very wary of Mepham's view that it is possible that "what really drives her writing is obsession and delusion" (Mepham: 1991, p.185). It may be true that some knowledge of Freud led her to believe "that unconscious wishes and illusions are central in the creative life," and certainly the writing of Mrs Ramsay had some therapeutic results for Woolf, but her purpose surely was more far-reaching than a "pathological" response to "the worm of obsession lurking in the rose of artistic genius" (Mepham: 1991, p.185). The writing of the domestic, the female consciousness, the woman artist, the transcendent self is not an "existential stance of disembodiment" which identifies Woolf's "incapacities" and failures due to past abuses in her life story (Mepham: 1991, p.187). This is to reduce out of recognition, and consequently lose a large part, of her fiction. This is not to read the text at all, but to see it in blindly diagnostical terms. This is to ignore, or perhaps refuse to acknowledge, the fundamental importance of Woolf's feminism.

It is interesting to note that Woolf herself was ambivalent in her attitude towards psycho-pathology. Elizabeth Abel's writing on Woolf's relationship to psychoanalysis in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (1989) is particularly useful. Despite the fact that the Hogarth Press published Freud's work and her friends James and Lytton Strachey translated Freud, the Bloomsbury group were divided in their responses to the new science. Woolf had met Freud and shown an interest in his work but ultimately Bell, Woolf and Fry

were largely hostile and saw the psychoanalytical theories as a possible threat to life and art. Hermione Lee points out that, whilst she explores the psyche in her autobiographical and fictional writing, Woolf was more concerned to negotiate the contemporary, competing, 'fictional' discourses of Freud and Darwin and find expression in "an original language of her own" for the experience of mental illness (Lee: 1996, p.187). De Battista also notes Woolf's avoidance of psychoanalytical terminology:

Her characters may exhibit the *symptoms* of the mental afflictions that preoccupy modern psychology, but neither they nor the narrator make explicit reference to the diagnostic *nomenclature* of psychoanalysis. Words like hysteria, complex, repression, trauma, melancholia, fetishism, cathexis are either absent or rarely encountered in her fiction.  
de Battista in Roe: 2000, pp. 128-129.

Telling the truth about the body in a mode that was suited to women was central to Woolf's feminist aesthetic and far outweighed a desire to embrace current male psychoanalytical theory:

The most notable aspect of the memoir is its preoccupation with the attempt to retrieve a sexual history which Woolf had nowhere else attempted to document. Though 'A Sketch of the Past' was begun entirely without strategy, she came to feel that the attempt to 'tell the truth about the body' - an attempt to which she had already referred, in *A Room of One's Own* - should continue a vital aspect of autobiography by women.  
Roe: 1990, p.43.

These stories, never before told, recall images which have occurred repeatedly throughout the fiction but here we encounter a historical and personal context. There is a distinction between "Virginia" and the narrator of the stories, the "I" which marks the blurring of the boundaries between writing and remembering; "between the ordering and the screening subject" (Roe: 1990, p.43-44). When Woolf tries to recount the specific incident of early abuse there is clearly an impersonal distance in the narration which might suggest the problem of finding a more personal voice to express such deep private/personal emotions. Hence the subject of the narrative "screens herself" by replacing an historical persona "Virginia," born on a specific date, with a "Virginia Stephen" who is a-historical, and who is therefore further dissociated from "her present subjective consciousness" (Roe: 1990, p.49). But it is this trans-historical



connection with the generations of women who have gone before her which explains her instinctive reaction of displeasure and fear. I would argue therefore that, even within the account of this event, which may have been an early trigger for a dissociation from and fragmentation of the self, at the time of writing this memoir there is evidence that she is still concerned to connect and involve herself with the issues of womanhood because she refers to the "thousands of ancestresses in the past" (*Moments*: 1976, p.69).

Indeed the writing of autobiography was, for Woolf, a revolutionary act, as Lee points out:

The inhibitions and censorships of women's life-writing is one of her most urgent subjects. It was still possible for her to say, in 1927, out of her reading of history and biography, 'Very little is known about women.'

Virginia Woolf's feminist programme, coming into its fullest and most explicit expression in her fifties, is above all a literary one. It is inextricably bound up with her desire to 'revolutionise biography. She wants to find new forms for 'women's as yet unnarrated lives'.

Lee: 1996, p.13.

There is no solid "I" in "A Sketch" but a shifting of perspective indicated by the use of multiple pronouns and naming. I would suggest that this de-centering of the female subject, indicative perhaps of the "fissures of female discontinuity," is not necessarily negative (Benstock: 1988, p.20). However confessional the subject matter within the non-fictional writing, there is always this tension between the personal and the impersonal. As we have seen above, even when disclosing the most painful and traumatic events, Woolf is at pains to make sure that she is not asking for pity to be directed personally towards her, she points away from herself and towards all women. This is perhaps due to "her perpetual fear of egotistical self-exposure" (Lee: 1996, p.17), but also, I believe, it is evidence of her feminist stance. That women's stories must be told, that writing about sexual experience, however negative, serves a universal purpose is certainly one interpretation. But these stories must be measured and controlled if they are to have any impact:

Her self-protectiveness is very strong in the feminist essays. This partly derives from a shrewd political sense of her audience's resistance to a woman's special pleading: she thinks her argument will have more impact if it is not perceived as a personal complaint. But it also shows a profound fear of exposing emotions like self-pity, sentimentality or vanity. Lee: 1996, p.17.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf tells us that evidence of anger and bitterness within the language of women's writing is counter-productive to the cause of making women heard and she criticises Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) because she detects the expression of "some personal grievance" (*A Room*: 1977, p.70) (2). We have already encountered Woolf's notion that a woman must kill the Angel in the House if she is to write. Her next problem is that if she does write, and if her writing is published, she must face the risk that she will be thought of as "a monster" (*A Room*: 1977, p.56). Although Woolf in no sense undermines the difficulties of the woman artist, she argues vehemently that anger, indignation and bitterness must not fetter the mind, that women must not think about their condition if their imagination is to be free. If women allow indignation to deflect them from achieving their genius then it is the texts themselves which become monstrous: "deformed and twisted" (*A Room*: 1977, p.67).

Woolf's constant concern is with the freedom of the imagination. If we allow ourselves to write from the position of victim, if we allow the "acidity which is the result of oppression" to inhibit us or to make us rage, then we are perpetuating the marginalisation of women and their interdiction from the free use of language (*A Room*: 1977, p.70). Woolf is able to say that there is "no lock" on her mind because she consciously removes her own grievances from the text, because she does not allow her imagination to "swerve" because of a personal sense of indignation (*A Room*: 1977, p.72, p.70).

Woolf was to explore the problem of union between male and female in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915) through Rachel's frustration that the two sexes seem to be impossibly disparate and her withdrawal, when she finds herself engaged to be married, which ultimately leads to her death. It is Rachel's understanding of the difference and separation of the two sexes which causes her to first resist the idea of marriage and then later consider breaking off her engagement in *The Voyage Out*, written at the height of the Suffrage movement. In an early exchange with Terence Hewett, her future fiancé, Rachel tries to explain why she has

been offended by Hirst's assumption that her life has so far been absurdly shallow due to her lack of literary experience and the equally terrible assumption of his own superiority. Whilst Rachel is aware that her day revolves around meal-times and entertainments, when he offers to lend her notable reading material Rachel is both insulted and appalled at Hirst's insolence. Unable to articulate fully the reason for her anger Rachel merely expresses herself "bitterly": "It's no good; we should live separate; we cannot understand each other; we only bring out what's worst" (*Voyage*: 1992, p.142). Hewett later explains why he thinks that women cannot help but respect learned men, such as Hirst, despite their insolence and arrogance:

'I believe we must have the sort of power over you that we're said to have over horses. They see us three times as big as we are or they'd never obey us. For that very reason, I'm inclined to doubt that you'll ever do anything even when you have the vote.' He looked at her reflectively. She appeared very smooth and sensitive and young. 'It'll take at least six generations before you're sufficiently thick-skinned to go into law courts or business offices. Consider what a bully the ordinary man is,' he continued, 'the ordinary hard-working, rather ambitious solicitor or a man of business with a family to bring up and a certain position to maintain. And then, of course, the daughters have to give way to the sons; the sons have to be educated; they have to bully and shove for their wives and families, and so it all comes over again. And meanwhile there are the women in the background ... Do you really think that the vote will do you any good?'  
*Voyage*: 1992, p.196.

This, of course, is reminiscent of Woolf's famous claim in *A Room of One's Own* that:

"Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and power of reflecting the figure of at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown" (*A Room*: 1977, p.35).

Rachel is indifferent to the vote, she plays the piano, but she is interested in finding out what men are like and gradually she falls in love with Hewett. The novel moves between misty and mystical scenes of romantic love, mergence, transcendence, and togetherness which are punctuated by realisations of the couple's actual separateness. The argument which nearly results in a breaking off of the couple's engagement is related to Rachel's separateness, her need for freedom and her ability to detach herself from Hewett who is jealous that she

"seemed to be able to cut herself adrift from him, and to pass away to unknown places where she had no need of him" (*Voyage*: 1992, p.285). Their realisation that they cannot separate from one another is "painful and terrible" but as they sit together in silence, division dissolves, the world solidifies and they feel "larger and stronger". It is only when they see themselves reflected in a mirror that they see themselves as others might see them:

it chilled them to see themselves in the glass, for instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of other things.  
*Voyage*: 1992, p.286.

In the following two weeks Rachel falls ill and dies. Hewett watches as she suffers but comes to realise that their lives are of no significance: "The nearness of their bodies in this vast universe, and the minuteness of their bodies, seemed to him absurd and laughable. Nothing mattered, he repeated; they had no power, no hope. He leant on the window-sill, thinking, until he almost forgot the time and the place" (*Voyage*: 1992, p.326). Rachel achieves her longed for isolation and freedom in death, and one cannot help but read a suicidal impulse here, as she wishes to transcend life and merge with the vast universe rather than become small and embodied in her relationship with Hewett:

for long spaces of time she would merely lie conscious of her body floating on the top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room. All sights were something of an effort, but the sight of Terence was the greatest effort, because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something. She did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world.  
*Voyage*: 1992, p.328.

Therefore, in this text, Rachel's rejection of marriage is linked to a rejection of her own body.

The question of how to reject notions which define us and constrict us through our bodies without rejecting our bodies by falsely believing that they are the source of oppression is one which must be foregrounded and one which is perhaps related to the problem of living in community. In order for *women* to break into fiction, Woolf tells us "the book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (*A Room*: 1977, p.74). The success of Jane Austen, as opposed to



George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë was, Woolf suggests, because she did not accept the limitation of "a man's sentence ... that was unsuited for a woman's purpose." Austen laughed at the inadequacy "and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it" (*A Room*: 1977, p.73). Rather than bemoan the fact that women have had less access to the public sphere, less freedom to travel, rather than allow the mad figure of Grace Poole to overshadow female narratives, a figure of victimisation, fear, alienation, imprisonment and death, Woolf would harness the creative forces which have saturated the walls of the home; she would bring us Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway, symbols of what she considered to be "the nature of this intricacy and the power of this highly developed creative faculty among women" (*A Room*: 1977, p.83). That Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway are concerned to bring together disparate male and female figures around the dinner table is important. Woolf would celebrate difference, she would seem to express some kind of essentialist notion of femininity, and yet she would still argue that in order to write, the mind must be androgynous, sex must remain "unconscious of itself" because thinking of the distinction of one's sex "interferes with the unity of the mind" (*A Room*: 1977, p.88 & p.92). In order to maintain focus, Woolf suggests one always has to repress certain states of mind and this becomes an effort. Perhaps, Woolf wonders, division can be overcome when one allows the "natural fusion" of male and female and maybe this will lead to "complete satisfaction and happiness" (*A Room*: 1977, p.93). When one allows the male and the female parts of the mind to work together in harmony, fertilisation and hence creativity will follow. The androgynous mind is "naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (*A Room*: 1977, p.94).

However, Woolf seems to suggest that this unity is itself an illusion, particularly for women whose consciousness is fragmented and alien:

Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself from the people on the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. [...] Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inhabitant of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.

*A Room*: 1977, pp.92-93.

Despite this distinction between the sexes, Woolf's ideas on the subject of male and female identities was in no way fixed. Woolf was interested to consider in her non-fiction and fictional texts the difference between men and women, their separateness and their need to communicate and live in harmony (3). Here in *A Room of One's Own* she tentatively lays down a theory of the sexes and their possible relationship:

And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each one of us two powers preside. one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating.

*A Room*: 1977, p.94.

Writing demands fertilisation if it is to be "[B]rilliant and effective, powerful and masterly" and this can only happen if we accept that we are, in our brains, both male and female. Woolf uses the image of the marriage bed to conclude this part of her argument:

it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. [...] Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtain must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. He must not look or question what is being done. Rather, he must pluck the petals from a rose or watch the swans float calmly down the river.

*A Room*: 1977, p.99.

This is a very different argument to the one Woolf was later to expound in *Three Guineas* (1938). In this polemical work Woolf upholds the notion that women should remain separate and be proud to form a Society of Outsiders, in order to distance themselves from the patriarchal urge towards a second world war. In this anti-fascist, anti-war essay Woolf argues

that women have a more heightened sense of morality and a more balanced ethical awareness than men because they have been marginalised and excluded from the dominant hierarchies of Western society. But we cannot forget that Woolf's later revisions accompanied a profound loss of faith in human connectedness with the advent of a second world war which would cause her ultimately death-dealing depression.

Let us now look at those non-fictions and fictions which give us an insight into Woolf's project of writing the body and her desire to appropriate language for woman's purpose.

## **Writing the Body**

Woolf was particularly interested in the relationship between the mind and the body, partly because her own emotional/mental sufferings, which she endured throughout most of her life, were experienced through physical symptoms in her body. Neck aches and debilitating headaches plagued her adult years from early womanhood. Whilst it may be tempting to offer diagnostical readings of Woolf's texts, my interest here is to look at the language she uses to describe that experience rather than to offer labels from psychoanalytic terminology. As Hermione Lee suggests naming can so often limit our reading:

To name the illness is to begin a process of description which can demote her extraordinary personality to a collection of symptoms, or reduce her writing to an exercise in therapy. But the named illness is also 'her' illness in that it took the material of her life as its subject matter, it, and the treatment she received for it, affected her personality, her behaviour, her writing and her politics. And it is 'her' illness in that much of what we know about it is derived from what she wrote about it. Her illness has become her language. . .

... Illness is at the mercy of language, and can only be identified and 'treated' (in a clinical and a literary sense) by being named. To choose a language for Virginia Woolf's illness is at once - from the very moment of calling it an illness - to re-write and re-present it, perhaps even to misinterpret it. Lee: 1996, p.176.

As Woolf herself was so concerned with finding a new language to describe her experience it is perhaps of more use to us to read from within the text than to impose external theories as to original causes. However, the effects are there for us to decipher when we read her original articulations in both the non-fiction and fictional writings. The following questions are the ones which have determined my analysis as I have read across the life-writing and the fiction:

What images does she use? What form does she create? How does the chosen and highly crafted technique of Woolf's writing help us to understand her notions about the body and its relation to language?

We shall see the existence of difference within the language of the non-fictional and fictional writings which examine and explore the reaches and the workings of the self. Whilst the content is similar, the tone and the voice is my main concern. Let us begin with Woolf's essay "On Being Ill", written for publication in T.S. Eliot's *New Criterion* in 1926. She begins:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm chair and confuse his 'Rinse the mouth - rinse the mouth' with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us - when we think of this and infinitely more, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would be devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to toothache.

*Essays*: 1967, p.317.

What is interesting here is the ascerbic humour with which she introduces her thesis. Whilst she claims these strange experiences as her own, and seems to take for granted that these are common to all who suffer a fever or are placed under anaesthetic, she immediately undermines any feelings of sympathy which may come willingly, or unwillingly, from the reader. Thus Woolf is at once setting up an empathy with other sufferers whilst distancing herself from pity or comfort. Hermione Lee describes Woolf as "a sane woman who had an illness ... She endured, periodically, great agony of mind and severe physical pain, with remarkably little self pity" (Lee: 1996, p.175). The depersonalisation which accompanies identification with, and distancing from, others is a form of control which keeps the anxiety of a confrontation with the strange at bay. This voice, controlled enough to handle wit and to structure language into a force to be reckoned with, is a public voice.



Woolf articulates the tension between light and dark, reality and the imagination, and highlights the "Uncanny Strangeness" (4) of "the undiscovered countries," "the wastes and deserts of the soul," "the pit of death," by juxtaposing "precipices" with "lawns," "bright flowers" with "the ancient and obdurate oaks". The balance of this contrast within the language not only expresses the existence of a fissure between imagination and reality, but also demonstrates an ability to work across the borders of representation. As Kristeva suggests in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988) "Uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased" (Kristeva: 1991, p.188). The use of humour enables the empowered to transcend any threat:

Some might change the weird into irony ... the humorist goes right through uncanny strangeness and - starting from a self-confidence that is his own or is based on his belonging to an untouchable universe that is not at all threatened by the war between same and others, ghosts and doubles - seeing in it nothing more than smoke, imaginary structures, signs. To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts.

Kristeva: 1991, p.188.

I would suggest that Woolf is not only empowering herself through her use of language but also, in this instance, the choice of reaction articulated here is dependant upon her sense of audience. As Lee explains Woolf was terrified of becoming incomprehensible and constantly afraid that she might be considered "crazy rather than brilliant" (Lee: 1996, p.195). Nicole Ward Jouve warns readers to beware any romanticising impulse when considering Woolf's illness. Whilst Woolf's writing might suggest a mystical, spiritual exploration into a virgin land, we cannot afford to ignore her obvious determination to formulate coherent representations of her mental state rather than produce 'mad' scribbles such as those of Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*. Jouve tells us that we must appreciate "how much alchemical hard work and determination enabled her to transform the material of madness into the material of art" (Jouve in Roe and Sellers: 2000, p.253). Woolf would not allow dream to be divorced from truth, nor would she allow insanity into her writing, for that would be "an evasion" of her literary calling,

a betrayal of her aesthetic self; above all Virginia Woolf was an artist (Lee: 1996, p.195).

Having gained our attention through use of pace, tone and structure, Woolf then takes us into the maelstrom of her exploration, her examination of the body which "intervenes" day and night and is not simply "negligible". To Woolf, the body is not "a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear" (*Essays*: 1967, p.317). For her, the soul, the mind and the body are not separate entities, they are inextricably connected and yet, in this essay, Woolf laments the failure of language to articulate the body. This failure seems due to cowardice as only the most "robust philosophy" can attempt such a task. For without courage we fall into myth: "this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism" (*Essays*: 1967, p.318). In the public sphere, an attempt at this kind of articulation would result in further expulsion from the patriarchal discourse of reason and logic, and perhaps result in an even more severe silencing.

Whilst Woolf toys with the notion of "a new language" which is fitted to articulating the experience of illness, she is also aware that it is during these periods, when the mind has more privacy and time, that fictionalisations abound and "the mind concocts a thousand legends and romances" (*Essays*: 1967, p. 318). The language which she accesses to portray this experience is the language of fantasy and fairy-tale. Friends become strangely beautiful or deformed, the patient is either exalted to the highest peak or becomes a dejected creature crawling around on the floor. Pleasure and pain exist side by side in a fluent symbiosis. Woolf maintains control through structure and tone, undermining the acceptable themes of the patriarchal tradition which neglects the significance of the body, by juxtaposing them with the language of imaginative transcendence:

Yet it is not only a new language that we need, primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favour of a temperature of 104; jealousy give place to the pangs of sciatica; sleeplessness play the part of villain, and the hero become a white liquid with

a sweet taste - that mighty Prince with the moth's eyes and the feathered feet, one of whose names is Chloral.  
*Essays*: 1967, p. 319.

This re-evaluation of hierarchies is not to be taken lightly despite Woolf's use of humour for, as her essay shows, the experience of the body, brought to us only when we are laid low in illness, is an experience which merits articulation. Woolf also points out that spoken communication during illness is less guarded: "There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional) a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals" (*Essays*: 1967, p. 320).

Woolf was concerned to formulate a new "private language" (Lee: 1996, p.192) separate from that of the grand theorists Darwin and Freud which could not only articulate as accurately and closely as possible the experience in order to explain it to herself and others but also to give to that experience a value. Woolf describes the return of "unreason" as the sensation of blood coursing back into a limb that has been numb or sleeping (*Diary*, 14 Sept 1919). This kind of metaphor occurs both in fiction and autobiography and this writing "recognises the virtue of her illness, the happiness of mania or its creativity, as well as its terror and pain" (Lee: 1996, p.191). Sympathy is rejected because it assumes continuous human connectedness and this, according to Woolf, is illusion. We do not know and understand one another completely. We do not know ourselves. We are at times alone and during these times we are free to roam in the unknown landscape of the soul.

Here, Woolf employs the language of exploration, summoning images from the continents of South America, Africa and Antarctica: "There is a virgin forest, tangled, pathless, in each; a snow field where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so" (*Essays*: 1967, p.320). During periods of health we must keep up the pretence, the "make-believe" that we are all part of one another. When we become ill we can retreat from "the army of the upright" and as "deserters" we can find the space and time to contemplate

nature and restore the imagination. It is interesting to note the contrasting diction employed here as Woolf moves from the language of exploration to that of invasion where patriarchal empiricism desires the cultivation and education of those newly found lands. These references are certainly reminiscent of the "dark continent" of female sexuality which is not discovered and explored by Freud but merely reconstructed ("Female Sexuality", 1931). The movement, then, is away from the discourses of logic and reason. Through the physical passivity brought about by illness the artist is able to perhaps found a utopia which does not necessitate the activity of war and occupation. A return to an archaic, perhaps pre-historic, self offers release and the space to discover/rediscover the means to be human and to be free.

Once horizontal, illness may be a deliberate refuge. When incapacitated, we can look at the sky, we can "become as the leaf." But we are not to expect solace to come from nature, for it is indifferent to our existence. Nature does not act as a mirror wherein we can re-unify; it merely shows us its own unity, its "perfect dignity and self-possession," its "inimitable rightness" with which we cannot merge and identify because we have to act, to live: "with the hook of life still in us still we must wriggle" (*Essays*: 1967, p. 322). The medium suggested here may be fluid but the worm, or the fish (one of Woolf's favourites as we have seen in *A Room of One's Own*), is a solid entity, albeit a slippery one.

There are many instances in Woolf's fiction where illness, physical or mental, is described alongside natural imagery. Fanny Elmer, for example in *Jacob's Room* (1922) seems only vaguely aware of the human world and man-made objects, she is agitated by the dim knowledge of the existence of others which she perceives from behind a veil, whilst the description of the natural world is far more vivid and detailed:

The body after long illness is languid, passive, receptive of sweetness, but too weak to contain it. The tears well and fall as the dog barks in the hollow, the children skim after hoops, the country darkens and brightens. Beyond a veil it seems. Ah, but draw the veil thicker lest I faint with sweetness, Fanny Elmer sighed, as she sat on a bench in Judges Walk looking at Hampstead Garden Suburb. But the dog went on barking. The motor-cars hooted on the road. She heard a far-away rush and humming. Agitation was at heart. Up she got and walked. The grass was freshly green; the sun

hot. All round the pond children were stooping to launch little boats; or drawn back screaming by their nurses. [...]

And Fanny moved, hearing some cry - a workman's whistle perhaps - high in mid air. Now, among the trees, it was the thrush trilling out into the warm air a flutter of jubilation, but fear seemed to spur him, Fanny thought; as if he too were anxious with such joy at his heart - as if he were watched as he sang, and pressed by tumult to sing. There! Restless, he flew to the next tree. She heard his song more faintly. Beyond it was the humming of the wheels and the wind rushing.

*Jacob's Room*: 1992, p. 102-103.

It is the jolt of the sharper "t" and "r" sounds which make us aware that Fanny's only clear connection with the world is the one with the bird and through this tiny awakening she is able to identify with that creature and recognise her own emotions (fear, joy, anxiety) reflected through it.

Characters who are not comfortable in their bodies find themselves drifting out towards the natural world, connecting themselves with trees or leaves or feeling themselves floating on water. Leaves and waves particularly reoccur in Woolf's attempts to express the experience of illness. We will look in more detail at Septimus (a war veteran suffering from mental illness, depicted in *Mrs Dalloway*) and his preoccupation with leaves towards the end of this chapter. Another interesting character to consider is Rhoda in *The Waves* (1931). Throughout the novel Rhoda expresses her desire for isolation and annihilation, she hides from her own image in the mirror (*Waves*: 1977, pp.34-35), she creeps around the far wall of a room rather than cross it, because she does not want to be seen or have any contact with the public. The world is separate and "immune from change" (*Waves*: 1977, p.85) but Rhoda is in constant flux, pulled this way and that, shaped by the world and the people around her. She has an acute persecution complex; every time a door opens "a tiger leaps" and "terror" pursues her (*Waves*: 1977, p.83):

'What I say is perpetually interrupted. I am not yet twenty-one. I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room.'

*Waves*: 1977, p.85.

Rhoda longs to be in another place, on another side of the world, but when she is forced to

communicate she is "thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to receive the shafts of his indifference and scorn, I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings." (*Waves*: 1977, p.84)

Rhoda longs to merge with nature; she cannot allow herself to become part of a social circle. She does not know how to behave, she watches others and mimics their actions. She also cannot allow for the passing of time, so fragmented is her sense of being:

One moment does not lead to another. The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come. I circled round the chairs to avoid the horror of the spring. I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do - I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me that are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. Because you have an end in view - one person, is it, to sit beside, an idea is it, your beauty is it? I do not know - your days and hours pass like the boughs of forest trees and the smooth green of forest rides to a hound running on the scent. But there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow. And I have no face. I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea-holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat. I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back.  
*Waves*: 1977, p.103.

Here we can see that fear and a sense of isolation accompanies the knowledge of the multiplicity of life, its instability. Finally, what divides Rhoda from the other characters in *The Waves* is that she chooses to "trust only in solitude and the violence of death" (*Waves*: 1977, p.182). Rhoda's ultimate act of separation is her suicidal leap to death.

Another dominant voice in *The Waves* is Bernard's and his leap is a leap into language, although his narration also moves between images of solidity and fluidity, his primary concern is with communication, the meeting of people, the telling of stories, the capture of real things in the concrete rather than the abstract world:

'We are swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shadow. We float. we float ...  
'However, since one must leap ( to tell you this story), I leap here, at this point, and alight now upon some perfectly commonplace object - say the poker and tongs.'  
*Waves*: 1977, p.203.

It is significant that Bernard has the last voice because he, above all, recognises the need for

human connectedness and the intercession of words. Bernard uses words to "draw the veil off things" (*Waves*: 1977, p.67). Whilst Bernard too would enter into an alternative, primeval world, he knows, ultimately that he needs an audience (*Waves*: 1977, p.92):

I wish to go under; to visit the profound depths; once in a while to exercise my prerogative not always to act, but to explore; to hear vague, ancestral sounds of boughs creaking, of mammoths; to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding - impossible to those who act. Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from a private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks; these starers and trippers; these errand-boys and furtive and fugitive girls who, ignoring their doom, look in shop windows? But I am aware of our ephemeral passage.  
*Waves*: 1977, pp. 90-91.

We may transcend the body and enter into a realm outside of the self, but nature is indifferent and humans insignificant.

The theme of withdrawal and the human need to reintegrate into social contact also appears at the end of *The Years* (1937). North is constantly being jolted back from silence and solitude by the need of others to communicate with him:

North took up his glass again. What was I thinking last time I looked at it? he asked himself. A block had formed in his forehead as if two thoughts had collided and had stopped the passage of the rest. His mind was a blank. He swayed the liquid from side to side. He was in the middle of a dark forest. 'So, North ...' His own name roused him with a start. It was Edward speaking. He jerked forward.  
*Years*: 1977, pp.407-408.

North's contemplations are interrupted by his companions' calls for him to make a speech, which he is reluctant to give. What is of interest in the following passage is his change of attitude as regards his formerly highly treasured silence and solitude:

Silence and solitude, he repeated; silence and solitude. His eyes half closed themselves. He was tired; he was dazed; people talked; people talked. He would detach himself, generalize himself, imagine that he was lying in a great space on a blue plain with hills on the rim of the horizon. [...] And he was floating, and drifting, in a shallop, in a petal, down a river into silence, into solitude ... which is the worst torture, the words came back to him as if a voice had spoken them, that human beings can inflict ...  
*Years*: 1977, p.418.

As North rejoins the party and makes everyone laugh Eleanor longs for more knowledge, not the knowledge brought through dreams and fantasy but real knowledge, which would help people to understand and know one another fully:

There must be another life, she thought, sinking back into her chair, exasperated. Not in dreams; but here and now, in this room, with living people. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice with her hair blown back; she was about to grasp at something that just evaded her. There must be another life, here and now, she repeated. This is too short, too broken. We know nothing, even about ourselves. We're only just beginning, she thought, to understand, here and there. [...] she felt that wanted to enclose the present moment; to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller, with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding.  
*Years: 1977, pp.421-422.*

After contemplation comes work and a return to language. In illness, Woolf explains in her essay, words take on a "mystic quality" because we are all the more able to reach beneath the surface of words and hear the sound, feel the ideas and images, this is instinctive and sensual. We are no longer dominated by the intellect which teases out meaning, rather "the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings" (*Essays: 1967, p. 324*). Also, in order to read we need the "rashness" of illness which breaks down the barriers of the intellect, the constraints of logic. Then we can become Hamlet, we can begin to see ourselves through art, we can begin a process of identification. To make a heaven out of nature necessitates imagination and art. Nature may offer us beauty but art is the mirror:

Then one is Hamlet, one is youth; as, to make a clean breast of it, Hamlet is Shakespeare, is youth. And how can one explain what one is? One can but be it. Thus forced always to look back or sidelong at his own past the critic sees something moving and vanishing in Hamlet, as in a glass one sees the reflection of oneself, and it is this which, while it gives an everlasting variety to the play, forbids us to feel, as with Lear or Macbeth, that the centre is solid and holds firm whatever our successive readings lay upon it.  
*Essays: 1967, p. 325.*

Not only does illness allow us time and space to retreat, contemplate and read, it also gives us a heightened awareness, which by-passes the laid-down highways of the intellectual response to language and allows us to excavate the imagination. However, we must not overlook the fact that whilst Woolf is always grasping for "the thing itself" which might be more tangible in this state of mind, this "partly mystical" journey is risky (*Writer's Diary: 1978, p.193*). For Woolf, the experience of 'knowingness' was problematic: "Indeed, its largely



the clearness of sight which comes at such seasons that leads to depression." (*Diary* Vol 1: 1979, p.298).

Let us now compare the style of Woolf's public writing with that of the more private and intimate voice in her letters and diaries. The letters sent to her closest and most trusted friends Vita Sackville-West and later Ethel Smyth, despite their self-conscious construction, offer perhaps the most revealing insights into Woolf's struggle with illness. In her letter to Vita Sackville-West, September 7, 1925, Woolf describes the isolation of illness. Here she echoes the themes which we have already seen in her essay on the subject. Although she tries to invent her friend through her imagination, she cannot attain the whole image because of human disconnectedness. She laments her inability to socialise and here we can see a repetition of the images in the essay alongside a more open and detailed articulation of the pain of illness:

It would be better to talk - much better. But I cannot talk yet without getting these infernal pains in my head, or astonishingly incongruous dreams. Two dull people come to tea, and I dream of precipices and horrors at night, as if - can they keep horrors and precipices concealed in them I wonder?

...

What a scrawl! I cannot write at this angle with this pen.  
*Letters* Vol 3: 1977, p.205.

Woolf described the three stages of the experience of these headaches in a letter to her friend Ethel Smyth, as being "pain; numb; visionary" (*Letters* Vol 4: 1978, p.183). Although this time of illness is perhaps a time when Woolf can prepare herself for the writing of her next novel, where her mind may be in "chrysalis" state (*Writer's Diary: 1978*, p.193), we can see here in the postscript the frustrating experience of being prostrated as regards the practical difficulty of handwriting and the misery of being forced to rest, to be solitary and, supposedly, inactive in terms of creativity. We can also see from a later letter to Vita (September 1929) that this lifestyle was imposed by Leonard throughout their marriage (5):

I'm a little dismal. Another of these cursed headaches. How I get them I can't imagine - Whether its writing, reading, or seeing people. Anyhow its not been bad at all - only it makes Leonard gloomy, and tightens my ropes - I mustn't walk, or do anything but sit and drink milk - you know the old story.  
*Letters* Vol 4 : 1978 , p.88.

In her letter to Janet Case, 18 September, 1925, Woolf explains that these infernal headaches are preventing her from writing her next novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), instead she is forced to think about writing:

I am still a good deal bothered with the infernal headache, so have to think about writing, instead of writing, and find all these problems awfully difficult. What is form? What is character? What is a novel?

Letters Vol 3: 1977, p.211.

The essay in which she explores these problems was sent to T.S. Eliot in November, 1925, with a short and simple apology for its delay - "I have been working under difficulties" (*Letters* Vol 3: 1977, p.220).

In *A Writer's Diary*, we gain an insight into the reality of these difficulties. Woolf had been bedridden for some time and the experience, as we have already seen, affected her physical ability to write as well as creating a mental apathy, and yet she is aware that writing would ultimately comfort and heal. Here is the voice of self-examination, judgement and encouragement:

*Monday, September 13th, perhaps*

A disgraceful fact - I am writing this at 10 in the morning in bed in the little room looking into the garden, the sun beaming steady, the vine leaves transparent green, and the leaves of the apple tree so brilliant that, as I had my breakfast, I invented a little story about a man who wrote a poem, I think, comparing them with diamonds, and the spiders' webs ... I am writing this partly to test my poor bunch of nerves at the back of my neck - will they hold or give again, as they have done so often? - for I am amphibious still, in bed and out of it; partly to glut my itch ('glut' and 'itch'!) for writing. It is the great solace and scourge.

*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.111.

The uncertainty regarding the date, the breaks in fluency indicated by hyphens and the passive contemplation of nature is reminiscent of a leaf blown about in the wind, but is also suggestive of transcendence.

Woolf is inspired to create and involve herself with words. She lingers over the sounds and meanings of 'glut' and 'itch', the harsh consonants and sharp vowels perhaps echoing her frustration and self-disgust at her laziness and incapacity but also, interestingly, these words refer us back to immanence and thus the body. To "glut", to fill an inner emptiness, to "itch",

to attend to a surface irritation. Kristeva debates the significance of language acquisition and its relationship to (wo)man's being in her chapter "Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents" (Kristeva: 1987, *Tales of Love*) For her, the interest lies not within the incorporation of an object but "being like" a model or imitating a pattern. Language is necessary to facilitate the movement from "having" to "being." If we return to the idea that talking and listening to oneself in diary form is the necessary response to a narcissistic tendency and consider that the "other" is a double, or another self, then the following reference from Kristeva is of particular interest with regard to the choice and emphasis of diction:

When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other - precisely a non-object, a pattern, a model - I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, unification. An identification. For me to have been capable of such a process, my libido had to be restrained; my thirst to devour had to be deferred and displaced to a level one may well call 'psychic', provided one adds that if there is repression it is quite primal, and that it lets one hold on to the joys of chewing, swallowing, nourishing oneself ... with words.  
Kristeva: 1987, p.26.

Kristeva explains that narcissism is a necessary process in order to achieve autonomy. If the Ego is to come into being then the speaking subject has to struggle free from the imaginary mother who becomes abjected, a separate object. Transference from the abjected mother to the imaginary father leaves the subject empty and the separation which accompanies primary identification is also the beginning of a movement towards language:

Narcissism would be that correlation (with the imaginary father and the "ab-jetted" mother) enacted around the central emptiness of that transference. This emptiness, which is apparently the primer of the symbolic function, is precisely encompassed in linguistics by the bar separating signifier from signified and by the "arbitrariness" of the sign, or in psychoanalysis by the "gaping" of the mirror.

If narcissism is a defense against the emptiness of separation, then the whole contrivance of imagery, representations, identifications, and projections that accompany it on the way toward strengthening the Ego and the Subject is a means of exorcising that emptiness. Separation is our opportunity to become narcissists or narcissistic, at any rate subjects of representation. The emptiness it opens up is nevertheless also the barely covered abyss where our identities, images, and words run the risk of being engulfed.

The mythical Narcissus would heroically lean over that emptiness to seek in the maternal watery element the possibility of representing the self or the other - someone to love. [...]

Psychotic persons, however, remind us, in case we had forgotten, that the representational contrivances that cause us to speak, elaborate, or believe rest upon emptiness.

Kristeva: 1987, pp. 41- 42.

That a return to words is necessary for healing is a theme we shall repeatedly encounter.

But, as Lee suggests, we cannot reduce Woolf's writing to a form of therapy, not only because her subject matter is much broader than the explication of "madness" but also because, although Woolf generally feels better when she is writing her fiction, writing is not an easy option:

A great deal of the process of controlling egotism, or translating personal material into art, is done with laborious painful difficulty. And that strenuous work marks the difference between the illness itself and what she does with it.

Lee: 1996, p. 194.

Creative paralysis appears to be a necessary state of restful dormancy before another work of art can begin, again suggesting that the brain-power required for such artistic efforts is itself a tremendous strain. In *The Diary*, we are told that Woolf fainted and fell ill on 19 August, 1925. Her next entry is from early September:

*Saturday 5 September*

And why couldn't I see or feel that all this time I was getting a little used up & riding on a flat tyre? So I was, as it happened; & fell down in a faint at Charleston, in the middle of Q.'s birthday party: & then have lain about here, in that odd amphibious life of headache, for a fortnight. This has rammed a big hole in my 8 weeks which were to be stuffed so full. Never mind. Arrange whatever pieces come your way. Never be unseated by the shying of that undependable brute, life, hag ridden as she is by my own queer, difficult nervous system. Even at 43 I don't know its workings, for as I was saying to myself, all the Summer, "I'm quite adamant now. I can go through a tussle of emotions peaceably that two years ago even, would have raked me raw."

I have made a very quick and flourishing attack on *To the Lighthouse*, all the same - 22 pages straight off in less than a fortnight. I am still crawling & easily enfeebled, but if I could once get up steam again, I believe I could spin it off with infinite relish. Think what a labour the first pages of *Dalloway* were! Each word distilled by a relentless clutch on my brain.

*Diary* Vol 3: 1980, p.38-39.

The 'relentless clutch' again seems to suggest mental and physical discomfort and we can understand a consequent reluctance to give way to the creative impulse. Woolf attaches the dark side of the discourses of fairy-tale to her own nervous system, which hag-like rides upon her and causes her to bolt, like an undisciplined or spooked horse. This fantasy language serves to distance the subject from the experience it is describing by use of impersonal metaphor. Her life is "that undependable brute", unnamed, dispassionate, disconnected and

certainly unsympathetic to her plight. However, the return to the fairy-tale is also a return to the imaginary rather than an engagement with the discourse of reason. Lets consider one final passage from the *Diary*, a passage supposedly written in July 1926 during a period of self-imposed isolation when Woolf was working on the composition of *To the Lighthouse*:

[Saturday 31 July]

*My own Brain*

Here is a whole nervous breakdown in miniature. We came on Tuesday. Sank into a chair, could scarcely rise; everything insipid; tasteless, colourless. Enormous desire for rest. Wednesday - only wish to be alone in the open air. Air delicious - avoided speech; could not read. Thought of my own power of writing with veneration, as of something incredible, belonging to someone else; never again to be enjoyed by me. Mind a blank. Slept in my chair. Thursday. No pleasure in life whatsoever; but felt perhaps more attuned to existence. Character & idiosyncrasy as Virginia Woolf completely sunk out. Humble & modest. Difficulty in thinking what to say. Read automatically, like a cow chewing cud. Slept in chair. Friday. Sense of physical tiredness; but slight activity of brain. Beginning to take notice. Making one or two plans. No power of phrase making. Difficulty in writing to Lady Colefax. Saturday (today) much clearer & lighter. Thought I could write, but resisted, or found it impossible. A desire to read poetry set in on Friday. This brings back a sense of my own individuality. Read some Dante & Bridges, without troubling to understand, but got pleasure from them. Now I begin to wish to write notes, but not yet novel. But today senses quickening. No 'making up' power yet; no desire to cast senses quickening. Curiosity about literature returning: want to read Dante, Havelock Ellis, & Berlioz autobiography; also to make looking glass with shell frame. These processes have sometimes been spread over several weeks.

*Diary* Vol 3: 1980, p. 103.

Gone is the fluency of transcendent imagination seen in the essay and the ability to cross borders without threat of annihilation. Instead the staccato sentencing is suggestive of a fragmented sense of self. The simile which she introduces when describing how she reads is that of a mindless domesticated beast, again her self-judgement seems harsh and unattractive.

Reading can stimulate a sense of self and give pleasure but she records with emotional indifference her apathy regarding creativity. The days pass uneventfully and the suggestion that this condition can span several weeks would indicate the repetition of an almost intolerable life experience, rather than something to be celebrated in words. Mental illness is therefore described in Woolf's private journal with little flair compared to the public language of the essay. The writing of this experience has limited emotional content, no drama, no lasting or impressionable images, it is instead indicative of a paralysing and stultifying boredom, the result of continued fatigue and inactivity. However, the final references to

autobiography, the mirror and the shell frame do suggest a movement towards more active reading and creativity which will aid her as she responds to the urge towards the next novel, *To The Lighthouse*.

In a letter to Ethel Smyth ( June 1930) Woolf appears to be giving a brief and light-hearted potted history of her life. The following passage, at the end of that letter, is ripe for analysis in terms of the form and language that she uses to describe her mental states:

And then I married, and then my brains went up in a shower of fireworks. As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere dribblets, as sanity does. And the six months - not three - that I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called oneself. Indeed I was almost crippled when I came back to the world, unable to move a foot in terror, after that discipline. Think - not one moment's freedom from doctor discipline - perfectly strange - conventional men; 'you shant read this' and 'you shant write a word' and 'you shall lie still and drink milk' - for six months.  
*Letters* Vol 4: 1978, p.180.

Within the same paragraph with have the counter-balance of the somewhat positive description of her madness and the crippling effect of the "Rest Cure" treatment. The two-sidedness of the experience is expressed and reflected clearly. The images of explosion and volcanic eruption which are suggestive of bright lights, heat, movement and energy are symmetrically juxtaposed with the monosyllabic discourse which is reminiscent of a child under restraint. Indeed the drinking of milk is a theme to which Woolf would repeatedly return in her letters and her diary. In a later letter to Ethel (October, 1930) she continues the theme of the relationship between her illness and her creative output. Here Woolf talks about her production of a collection of short stories, *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), a novel *Night and Day* (1919) and the conception of later work, during one of her bouts of physical incapacity and restraint (6):

You are perfectly right about Green and Blue and the heron one [Monday or Tuesday]: thats mainly why I won't reprint. They are mere tangles of words; balls of string that the kitten or Pan [Ethel's dog] has played with. One of these days will write out some short phases of my writer's life; and expound what I now merely say in short-After being ill and suffering every form and variety of nightmare and extravagant intensity of perception - for I used to make up poems, stories, profound and to me inspired phrases all day long as I lay in bed and thus sketched, I think, all that I now, by the light of reason, try to put into prose (I thought of the Lighthouse then, and Kew and others, not in

substance, but in idea) - after all this, when I came to, I was so tremblingly afraid of my own insanity that I wrote *Night and Day* [1919] mainly to prove to my own satisfaction that I could keep entirely off that dangerous ground. I wrote it, lying in bed, allowed to write only for one half hour a day. And I made myself copy from plaster casts, partly to tranquillise, partly to learn anatomy. Bad as the book is, it composed my mind, and I think taught me certain elements of composition which I should not have had the patience to learn had I been in full flush of health always. These little pieces in Monday or (and) Tuesday were written by way of diversion; they were the treats I allowed myself when I had done my exercise in the conventional style. I shall never forget the day I wrote *The Mark on the Wall* - all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept stone breaking for months. The Unwritten Novel was the great discovery, however. That - again in one second - showed me how I could embody all my deposit of experience in a shape that fitted it - not that I have reached that end; but anyhow I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, *Jacobs Room* [1922], *Mrs Dalloway* [1925] etc - How I trembled with excitement; and then Leonard came in, and I drank my milk, and concealed my excitement, and wrote I suppose another page of that interminable *Night and Day* (which some say is my best book). All this I will tell you one day - here I suppress my natural inclination to say, if dear Ethel you have the least wish to hear anymore on a subject that cant be of the least interest to you. And, I add, *Green and Blue* and the heron were the wild outbursts of freedom, inarticulate, ridiculous, unprintable mere outcries. *Letters* Vol 4:1978, p.231.

Again it is interesting to note the contrast set up within the language which is a formal reflection of the experience. Note the longer sentences and repeated use of hyphens when Woolf is describing inspirational flashes and discoveries about form which would influence her later work as opposed to the shorter sentences and more measured use of punctuation in the areas where she is relating the laborious task of "mining" *Night and Day*. However, we cannot overlook the need to surface from the diversionary, underground tunnels in order to put these ideas into practice "by the light of reason", that some of the "outbursts of freedom" are too inarticulate to re-publish and that the "interminable" *Night and Day* had been well received. (7) Again we have a balance in the expression of the contradiction of feeling/emotion and logic/intellect.

In Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth it is also interesting to note that she often refers to her friend's sanity and asks for sane responses to her questions or sane opinions on a certain subject (8). By contrast, she constantly refers to her own "insanity" in these letters: "And remember - not I confess that you seem in any danger of forgetting this elemental fact - what a crazy piece of work I am - like a cracked looking glass in a fair" (*Letters* Vol. 4: 1978, p. 203.). The tone in which she conveys this subject matter is informative, often humorous and,

always, there is the sense of a need to be quick-witted and highly articulate even when she is describing the most painful moments. Metaphors and similes abound in these accounts of illness. In a letter where she is describing the state of "complete drowsiness" which follows the pain of her attacks she writes:

I'm like an alligator, nostrils only visible, and a kind keeper gives me bananas. Ethels one of my kind keepers. I was awake in the night; terrified and laid hold of you, like a log. One day I'll write the history of my spine: I think I can feel every knob: and my whole body feels like a web spread on the knobs, and twitchy and sagging and then sinking into delicious rest.  
*Letters* Vol 4: 1978, p.208.

Also, although these letters are revealing to a certain extent because of their intimacy in terms of theme and subject, they are equally insightful due to the continual attempts at joviality. Woolf, at no point, will invite, nor allow, pity or self-pity to weigh down or dampen the spirit evident in her language. Certainly in her correspondence with Ethel the emphasis is on projecting a character which she describes as "a transient and fitful flame" (*Letters* Vol. 4: 1978, p.169).

## Woolf's Mirrors

As we move on now to consider the fictionalisation of life experience in Woolf's writing I want to consider particularly the recurring theme of the mirror and its reflected images. Again my interest will lie within the similarities and differences in form and voice between the autobiographical writing in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939) and the fictional language of two short stories: "The New Dress" (1927), and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929). Kristeva claims that narcissism is a necessary form of protection, a process which screens us from the experience of "emptiness" which occurs at the point of separation before the subject enters into the Symbolic stage and suggests:

Narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist and thus, as lining of that emptiness, ensures an elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos would sweep away any possibility of distinction, trace and symbolization, which would in turn confuse the limits of the body, words, the real and the symbolic.  
Kristeva: 1987, p. 24.



The structuring of primary narcissism is, therefore, a response to the opening of the gap or fissure which occurs at the point of differentiation and identification. Writing about the self, as we have already discussed, involves an objectification of the subject and this is particularly the case when life experience is fictionalised. The use of third person characterisation produces a unification within the process of self-reflection. However, as Benstock suggests, this unified self is as false as the image produced in the Mirror Stage as described by Lacan. The initial perception, then, of the self as fragmented and dispersed, results in the urge to create some kind of integrated whole and so the subject is made an object of investigation. Now that the exclusive and seemingly impenetrable dyad between mother and child has been dissolved language begins to formulate a third point in the extension caused by the fissure and takes its place in a triad between signifier and signified, between the performative and the speculative. That language acquisition occurs at the same time as a realisation of the presence of the Father would account for the domination of the notion that the phallus is the root to all signification and necessary to the successful entrance into the Symbolic. For women, then, language becomes problematic since we are de-centred automatically by our lack or "abjection" and therefore, Kristeva explains, language seems foreign, alien, part of the civilised world of which we are not part, or from which we have at least been marginalised.

How can women writers challenge these patriarchal notions? It seems that we either must adhere to the law of the dominant Symbolic in order to be read or risk further silencing by a descent into the semiotic babble of the Imaginary which, as adults rather than infants, would perhaps constitute the language of madness. Kristeva's work investigates the dialectic between semiotic impulses and thetic control and seeks an answer to the questions faced by all female writers: how do we hold a position which speaks against phallogocentric logic; how do we inscribe the repressed and unspeakable in language and how do we withstand the pull towards silence or even psychosis? (9) It seems to me that these were the questions with which Woolf

repeatedly concerned herself. We have only to look at *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to see how Jane Austen was so admired by Woolf because she had "devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it" (*A Room*: 1977, p.73). By contrast, Woolf scorns those female writers who were either in revolt or in obedience to masculine values and "the eternal pedagogue" (*A Room*: 1977, p. 64). Austen is admired for her ability to express her observation of human relationships without bitterness and for her rejection of "a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use" (*A Room*: 1977, p.73). Woolf tentatively suggests that the very form of women's fiction "has somehow to be adapted to the body" due to the physical restraints which shape their lives, the constant interruptions, the need for rest. Woolf throughout this text draws our attention to the difference of experience between the sexes which necessitates a different and new response to language if we are to claim equality.

Another question: how do we respond to this initial abjection, or killing off, of the Mother? If narcissism is a necessary screening process to protect us from the abyss opened up by differentiation between mother and infant, how does the female child respond to the next stage wherein the female is placed outside of the Symbolic Order? It seems that she may either be consigned to a continuing narcissistic tendency in order to formulate an identity through her relationship with the other reflected in the glass, which would lead to a schizophrenic splitting of consciousness, or that she will seek identification by reading the signs of the responses that others give to her, which puts her in the role of the paranoiac. Language also becomes the screen defending the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, as well as the mirror within which the repressed can be framed and reflected in some discrete form.

Whilst Woolf was concerned to break the "screen-making habit" in her *Writer's Diary* and record instead the "loose, drifting material of life" in a "loose" and "elastic" form so that her mind could "embrace" anything, she was also aware of the threat of annihilation were the

screens not to exist at all (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.23). The following entry was written in 1926 when Woolf was completing *To The Lighthouse*, the autobiographical novel in which she investigates her relationship with her parents which we shall investigate more fully later:

The screens shut me out. Have no screens, for screens are made out of our own integument; and get at the thing itself, which has nothing whatever in common with a screen. The screen-making habit, though, is so universal that probably it preserves our sanity. If we had not this desire for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly; separateness would be impossible. *Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.100.

This not only touches on the effect of writing but also, to a certain extent, constitutes the theme within the following passages from Woolf's short stories (10).

### **The Lady in the Looking-Glass (1929)**

"The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" is a short piece of fiction which explores how a character can be constructed through imagination and language and suggests a self which exists beyond the confining surface of a mirror. Woolf moves between surface and depth, the real and the imagined. The fixed, framed and lifeless reflections in the hall mirror are juxtaposed with the moving and mutable objects which are not within its range. Only imagination can prize open the lady and the rich language and imagery in the text becomes the medium through which this exploration is expressed when she is not framed within the mirror. However, there is a recurring urgency about the need for truth: "There must be truth; there must be a wall," and the need to *know* and convey accurately this woman's private life, her knowledge, her romances, her preferred flowers, her thoughts and memories, her actions at the bottom of the garden. A tension is brought out by the juxtaposition of this concern through the narrative voice alongside the images which are suggestive rather of the wild and uncontrolled. The speaker of the narrative speculates and builds a character out of this speculation until the denouement when the lady returns and is reflected in the hall mirror which, through the open door, can encapsulate the pathway through the nearer part of the garden to the house:

One must imagine - here was she in the looking-glass. It made one start

She was so far off at first that one could not see her clearly. She came lingering and pausing, here straightening a rose, there lifting a pink to smell it, but she never stopped; and all the time she became larger and larger in the looking-glass, more and more completely the person into whose mind one had been trying to penetrate. One verified her by degrees - fitted the qualities one had discovered into the visible body. There were her grey-green dress, and her long shoes, her basket, and something sparkling at her throat. She came so gradually that she did not seem to derange the pattern in the glass, but only to bring some in new element which gently moved and altered the other objects as if asking them courteously, to make room for her. And the letters and the table and the grass walk and the sunflowers which had been waiting in the looking-glass separated and opened out so that she might be received among them. At last there she was in the hall. She stopped dead. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly still. At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her - clouds, dress, basket, diamond - all that one had called the creeper and the convolvulus. Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing, Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them.

People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms.

*Complete Shorter Fiction*: 1991, p.225.

The last line of the story is an exact echo of the opening line, thus framing the narrative, and within this passage we have a condensation/concentration of many of the elements which have come before this incident. Therefore the language is representative of the climactic reflection and focuses within its framework the themes which are explored throughout the story.

Here we can see Woolf's perception of the mirror and its reflections as a threat to identity. As La Belle explains in *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (1988) Woolf was concerned not to be trapped or captured by the glass: "mirroring typified an alternative to the personality she constructed through language" (La Belle: 1988, p.156). The creating of an exterior self through the imagination is far more important than being constrained by the need for feminine reconstructions in the mirror. Despite the fact that the narrator tries to convince us that "real" Isabella is the one in the glass at the end of the story, we are not convinced.

Gerard Duckworth is an interesting figure in Woolf's personal history and I would like here to make a link between the hall mirror in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" and an incident in Woolf's autobiography which exposes her brother as an abusive and influential force in the shaping of personality and memory. Woolf questions whether, when memories

come back to the surface, it is perhaps because there is an existent trace of a previously forgotten strong emotion. She tries to work out and articulate why it should be that the memory of looking at herself in the hall mirror at Talland house should be accompanied by the memory of a feeling of guilt and shame, why she only looked when she was sure she was alone. Woolf realises that her ability to feel ecstasy and rapture was only possible when disconnected from any sense of herself as body, that, therefore, she must have been ashamed or afraid of her own body. In her autobiographical writing, "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf attempts to articulate an incident from her personal history, which occurred in the hall, thus accounting for this disconnection from her own body:

There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking it - what is the word for so numb and mixed a feeling?

*Moments*: 1976, p.69.

Woolf refers repeatedly in these autobiographical writings to the problem of trying to describe or give an account of "the person to whom things happen" because "the person is evidently immensely complicated" (*Moments*: 1976, p.69). Although a writer can collect the events and incidents in a person's life, the person remains unknown. Woolf adds a dream which she suggests may refer to the real event described above:

I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face - the face of an animal - suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. Was I looking in the glass one day when something in the background moved, and seemed to me alive? I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me.

*Moments*: 1976, p.69.

Again the fusion between the imagined and the real is evident here. Both are incorporated, neither one prioritised, because the effect is the same. La Belle suggests that "the spectral dread of the mirror" in Woolf's dream is "a foreboding of insanity":

It is only one step away from looking in the mirror and, instead of seeing her own face, seeing something nonhuman. Some of Woolf's reasons for her difficulties with the mirror seem positive -

there is more to her willed identity than the visual image. But her primal, instinctual relationship with the mirror also harbors a fear of the mirror, and hence of the self, a terror of what she will see in the glass.

La Belle: 1988, p.158.

Flight from the mirror, La Belle continues, can result in either freedom and independence from the process of self-definition through the mirror, or madness. Certainly, the links here between narcissism, paranoia and schizophrenia are interesting when we look at Jung's theory. He suggests that the hallucinations of the schizophrenic are "significant psychic products" which come out of the splitting of the ego into multiple experiencing subjects. Paranoia is the simplest form in which the personality has merely doubled. When the patient suffers a persecution attack it is because the ego, which experiences itself as a victim, becomes autonomous and rises to the surface. The healthy ego is paralysed, ineffective. This is not a chance or meaningless happening but is linked to "a particular psychological moment" (Jung in Storr: 1986, p. 41). This extraordinary moment must have had "a profound and dangerous effect" for it to produce such intense fear of external hostility (Jung in Storr: 1986, p.42). When this event happens the emotional life of the subject is damaged due to the hypersensitive state of youth/childhood, hence "the spiritual form which his emotions needed in order to live" is broken down. Paranoid convictions, delusions and hallucinations are a later result of this early disintegration of the personality. Sue Roe sees the inclusion of the dream passage, an addition to the story of abuse, as an attempt by Woolf to signal that it is the action of an other "that disturbs her sense of her own integrity," hence the source which interrupted the self "takes on an appropriately monstrous form" in the unconscious mind which dreams and within the language of this passage (Roe: 1990, p.53).

The dream/memory which Woolf describes may well be linked to her early experience of incestuous abuse and the image of the fearful face in the mirror could be a confrontational reminder of a repressed, hidden, secret fear which is projected outwards and appears reflected

as an other. The mirror acts as an enclosing screen to protect her from this other but also a link to the "where" of the initial petrifying/paralysing incident. Hence, the appearance of the other is not necessarily a negative event in terms of mental health, as Laing suggests:

Indeed, what is called psychosis is simply sometimes the sudden removal of the veil of the false self, which had been serving to maintain an outer behavioural normality that may, long ago, have failed to be any reflection of the state of affairs in the secret self.  
Laing: 1959, p.100.

I would suggest that the writing of the dream passage is an attempt to articulate the "dumb and mixed feeling", for which Woolf could not find expression in the preceding passage.

Through imagery and metaphor she may be able to exorcise the real event by traversing the boundaries between fact/fiction, real/imaginary, conscious/unconscious, and by framing the incident within language she has gained some control over the effect of the memory.

The mirror in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" does not offer release from reality but seems to petrify and fix objects and people within its frame ("She stopped dead"). All the beauty is drained out of the character as the imagination ceases to have effect. Confronted with "the hard wall" of "truth", the surface of the mirror, we are left with an image which is devoid of any attractive quality. The closing and opening admonition; "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms," suggests that the narrator would prioritise the imagination over reality because the objects outside of the frame of surface reality are free to move, vibrant and beautiful. Rather "the light and fantastic and leafy and trailing, traveller's joy", rather "the tremulous convolvulus" at the far reaches of the garden, than "the upright aster, the starched zinnia" or the "burning roses alight like lamps on the straight posts of their rose trees" which are captured within the glass.

### **The New Dress (1927)**

In "The New Dress" (1927) the central female protagonist Mabel vacillates between self-love and self-loathing. During Mrs Dalloway's party she is confronted with a sense of inferiority and

paranoia because she considers that the dress she is wearing is unfashionable and inappropriate. And yet she recalls a prior positive self-image when she was being fitted for the dress she is now wearing. Not only is Mabel annoyed and frustrated by this vacillation but also she is perplexed by her inability to decide which one of these opposing emotional extremes reflects reality or the truth. The lack of fixity and stability in Mabel's internal emotional world is represented metaphorically by the questioning of the reality or unreality of the images which are reflected in the two looking-glasses, one in the dress-maker's room and one in Mrs Dalloway's drawing-room. Thus we can see that this earlier story reflects again Woolf's interest in the relationship between surface and depth, reality and the imagination as it relates to knowledge of the self. The tension created for the reader by the narrator's description of the lady's reflection in the glass as opposed to the earlier image of her in the garden is similar to that regarding the contrast between the image of herself which Mabel remembers at the dress-maker's and the one she sees at the party. Which images do we read as "real"?

The story begins when Mabel arrives at the party and experiences the initial sense that the new dress she has had made is altogether wrong. Her consequent shame and humiliation, she believes, is deserved because she had indulged in the self-love (the prior positive reflection) that had led her to choose and deem acceptable, even admirable, this particular style, colour and fashion. She had been pleased that, despite the fact that she had only a limited purse, she had at least originality. Mabel believes that she can see through the veneer of friendliness, that she can sense the lies and insincerity of the others at the party. She begins to question what is real, whether the party brings out reality, whether the image that she saw in the dressmaker's glass was false:

For a party makes things either much more real, or much less real, she thought; she saw in a flash to the bottom of Robert Haydon's heart; she saw through everything. She saw the truth. *This* was true, this drawing-room, this self, the other false ... and yet when Miss Milan put the glass in her hand, and she had looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with light, she sprang into existence. Rid of cares and wrinkles, what she had dreamed of herself was there - a beautiful woman. Just for a second (she had not dared look longer, Miss Milan



wanted to know about the length of the skirt), there looked at her, framed in the scrolloping mahogany, a grey-white, mysteriously smiling, charming girl, the core of herself, the soul of herself; and it was not vanity only, not only self-love that made her think it good, tender, and true. Miss Milan said the skirt could not well be longer; if anything the skirt, said Miss Milan, puckering her forehead, considering with all her wits about her, must be shorter; and she felt, suddenly, honestly, full of love for Miss Milan, much, much fonder of Miss Milan than of anyone in the whole world, and could have cried for pity that she should be crawling on the floor with her mouth full of pins, and her face red and her eyes bulging - that one human being should be doing this for another, and she saw them all as human beings merely, and herself going off to a party, and Miss Milan pulling the cover over the canary's cage, or letting him pick a hemp-seed from between her lips, and the thought of it, of this side of human nature and its patience and its endurance and its being content with such miserable, scanty, sordid, little pleasures filled her eyes with tears.

And now the whole thing had vanished. The dress, the room, the love, the pity, the scrolloping looking-glass, and the canary's cage - all had vanished, and here she was in a corner of Mrs Dalloway's drawing-room, suffering tortures, woken wide awake to reality.  
*Shorter Fiction*: 1991, p. 172.

Not only does this passage call for our particular attention due to the singularity of the positive self-image but also because here there is a sense of love, sympathy and human connectedness/understanding which will be undermined and negated at the party where Mabel experiences the "spears" of prejudice and scorn.

The reflection in the mirror at the party merely shows a yellow dot, or button "the size of a three penny bit" which is disconnected and detached. When she does attempt communication with the "cormorants" and "magpies" she realises, by studying the images reflected, that everyone is greedily and tragically snatching for sympathy, and yet: "it was impossible that the black dot, leaning forward, gesticulating, should make the yellow dot, sitting solitary, self-centred, feel what the black dot was feeling, yet they pretended" (*Shorter Fiction*: 1991, p.174). It is this very pretence which Mabel finds so distasteful and from which she wishes to distance and extricate herself. And yet she herself succumbs, at the end of the story, to insincerity when she tells Mrs Dalloway, despite her good intentions to escape "the saucer of milk" in which she has been trapped like a fly and the "Lies, lies, lies" with which she has been confronted, that she has enjoyed herself "enormously". Hence, she allows herself to be caught once again by the contagious, insidious and insinuating hypocrisy which has pervaded the narrative.

But what do we make of this recollected image in the glass, this explosion of light, this jouissance, this love and sympathy? Clearly she is no longer a "charming girl", and the "core" of being is problematic when we consider that Woolf's writing constantly questions the notion of solidity, unification and essentialism. Yet, the language here is a forerunner to a later passage where Mabel remembers "divine moments" of being when she is with her family. Here we have a momentary revelation/epiphany where reality seems to dissolve and framed within the looking-glass is an image which seems to fulfil all Mabel's desires in a fluid, ebullient outpouring of well-being. The positive image of the "beautiful woman" she has always dreamed of suggests that Mabel, in this instance, escapes the self-loathing and disgust that accompanies an encounter with the other who is aged and wrinkled. As La Belle explains when a woman looks into the glass she is confronted with three temporally defined images; that of the past or who she used to be, that of the present or who she is, and that of the future or who she thinks she will become (La Belle: 1988, p.76). For women who accept the reflected image to be a true representative of their self the result of a confrontation with an ageing and degenerating self is traumatic (La Belle: 1988, p.109). Denial and flight is perhaps the suggestion here as Mabel embraces the otherness of youth which is "suffused with light". However, the use of "a beautiful woman" and "it" as being "good, tender and true" suggests at once a further dislocation from the other. She knows that this is not a reflection of her surface but of the inner self she longs to be. What she fears to see reflected in the glass at the party however is "the whole horror" of the dress, the outer surface of her clothing which she has taken on in the vain hope of being accepted by people she neither trusts nor admires.

Freud's theories on narcissism and paranoia may be of some interest to us here. He suggests that when the stability of the ego is threatened by reality a return to the child and primary narcissism brings security. In Mabel's reminiscence she sees herself as a love-object and sets up an idealised image which momentarily releases her from the reality of being

watched, measured and judged by others. But this ideal ego is unstable and the moment fleeting. The actual ego is measured against the imagined and her self-criticism, as well as the external criticisms, upset the constructed narcissistic perfection (11). This watching and measuring of the real ego can lead to delusions of feeling observed, paranoia, whereby the subject is assailed by external voices in the third person.

Simone de Beauvoir also writes about the inherent danger of insanity when a subject is convinced that she deserves to be admired:

This kind of insanity does in fact change easily into delusions of persecution ... The narcissist finds it impossible to admit that others are not passionately interested in her, if she has manifest proof that she is not adored, she imagines at once that she is hated. She attributes all criticism to jealousy or spite. Her frustrations are the result of evil machinations, and this confirms in her the idea of her own importance. She slips easily into megalomania or its opposite: delusions of persecution. Being the centre of her own universe and knowing no other universe than hers, she becomes the absolute centre of the world.  
de Beauvoir: 1953, p.605.

Hence Mabel believes that she can hear what the others are thinking about her and later in the narrative her own vigil is emphasised by the use of impersonal pronouns signalling the split within her own consciousness: "So she got up from the blue sofa, and *the* yellow button in the looking-glass got up too" (my emphasis).

The sense of well-being and pleasure Mabel remembers is not only connected to the idealised image, but also is to do with the care of Miss Milan. She feels loved and therefore satisfied. Miss Milan offers no threat as she crawls around her feet tending to Mabel's needs and this human sympathy and love is reciprocated; the narcissistic self-love allows her to experience love for others as opposed to the paranoiac self-loathing where she sees to the bottom of hearts and experiences hostility and alienation. Within this story, then, we have an exploration of the pleasure and the pain of human existence which is inseparable from the relationship of ego to object (12). The division of the world into the pleasurable, which is internalised and results in love and attraction, is juxtaposed with alienation, the necessary separation from that part of the world which causes pain. This alienation might incorporate an

inner divide but the pain is, nevertheless, projected onto the external world and therefore the world of others is considered as hostile.

The resulting repulsion and flight at the end of "The New Dress" does not suggest a resolution of hostility, Mabel too resorts to untruths, but perhaps more significantly the story is framed by the old "Chinese cloak". Mabel knows as soon as she arrives and takes off her cloak that something is wrong. When she leaves she cocoons herself again, as she has done for twenty years, wrapping herself "round and round and round". I would suggest that in doing this she is not only protecting herself, but also it is an attempt to resolve, until the next social engagement, her paranoid neurosis. The cloak covers the dress, it is also an article of clothing which is trans-sexual, therefore Mabel becomes de-sexed, or androgynous. It seems to me that Woolf was, among others things, concerned to expose the mental as well as the physical constraints which accompany patriarchal constructions of femininity.

The two mirror images are also interesting when we consider the private and positive experience of narcissism in the first mirror as opposed to the public exposure and critical eye which is influenced by societal expectations of fashionable and feminine clothing. The mirror at the party reflects the "male gaze" rather than her own perception of self. The problem then seems to be that the second mirror is complicitous with social valuation and validation of the ego. Perhaps Mabel is already considered to be unfeminine because she is well read and intelligent rather than decorative. When she decides to continue the struggle to be happy, having found a way out of the saucer at the end of the story, it is the thought of education and political involvement which seem to offer her hope:

She would go to the London Library tomorrow. She would find some wonderful, helpful, astonishing book, quite by chance ... or she would walk down the Strand and drop, accidentally, into a hall where a miner was telling about the life in the pit and suddenly she would become a new person. She would be absolutely transformed. She would wear a uniform; she would be called Sister Somebody; and she would never give a thought to clothes again.

*Shorter Fiction*: 1991, p. 176.

Mabel's problem is that she falls victim to the notion that the second mirror reflects more

accurately her self and she becomes ensnared by the opinions of others because she has allowed herself to be "captured in the motionless, silvered trap." (de Beauvoir: 1953, p.598)

Mabel's problem of discerning which is the "real" image is a problem which is to do with the subjectivity and identification of many females:

... all her life the woman is to find the magic of the mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification ... In woman particularly, the image is identified with the ego. Handsome appearance in the male suggests transcendence; in the female, the passivity of immanence ... Man, feeling and wishing himself active, subject, does not see himself in his fixed image; it has little attraction for him, since man's body does not seem to him an object of desire; while woman, knowing and making herself object, believes she really sees *herself* in the glass. A passive and given fact, the reflection is, like herself, a thing; and as she does covet female flesh, her flesh, she gives life through her admiration and desire to the imaged qualities she sees.  
de Beauvoir: 1953, pp. 598-599.

It would seem that this story is not only a feminist criticism of gender constructions but also a reflection of the narcissistic, performative tendencies prevalent among women.

As Hermione Lee points out Woolf was interested in the variant selves which presented themselves and performed at public engagements as opposed to the self which she tried to capture in her diary extracts and she was also concerned with and aware of "her see-saws between involvement and withdrawal" (Lee: 1996, p.530). In her diary entry April 11, 1926 she seems to echo Mabel's cocooning process at her exit from the party: "I have wrapped myself round in my own personality again" (*Diary* Vol 3: 1980, p. 74). This seems to suggest that there is a more comfortable and familiar self with which she can clothe herself which is perhaps less vulnerable than the selves she feels she exposes in public. And yet Woolf is again ambivalent in her attitude. In other entries she seems to relish the idea of parties rather than fear exposure and although there is evidence that she often felt outmodish and uncomfortable about her clothing there is also evidence that she enjoyed dabbling with fashion: "Happiness is to have a little string [with] onto which things will attach themselves. For example, going to my dressmaker - thinking of a dress, imagining it made - that is the string" (April 20, 1925, Bodleian Berg Collection, Quentin Bell). Also she interests herself in the selves that other

people project: "But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness. The fashion world at the Beck. [In left hand margin 'second selves is what I mean']" (April 27, 1925 Bodlean Berg Collection, Quentin Bell). Her own sense of positioning is ambiguous when she seems to make some distinction between herself, as an outsider and perhaps unprotected, and those who do protect themselves and connect themselves to others. She considers "people who secrete an envelope that connects them. & protects them. from others like myself who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies" (April 27, 1925 Bodlean Berg Collection, Quentin Bell). It is not clear whether it is she or the others who are foreign bodies. In a letter to Ethel Smyth (March 1931), Woolf tries to explain and resolve a conflict which has occurred between them. She is adamant about her reluctance to be exposed at public engagements where the "chatter and clatter on top of any art, music, pictures, which I dont understand, - is an abomination" (*Letters* Vol. 4: 1978, p.297) and where she feels victim to "wolves and vultures" (*Letters* Vol. 4: 1978, p.298). She expresses her indignation and sense of betrayal because she was forced to attend a party for Ethel at Lady Rosebery's in February, 1931:

It was the party. I dont know when I have suffered more; and yet why did I suffer? and what did I suffer? Humiliation: that I had been dragged to that awful Exhibition of insincerity and inanity against my will (I used to be dragged by my half-brothers against my will - hence perhaps some latent sense of outrage) ... It seemed to me that you had wantonly inflicted this indignity upon me for no reason, and that I was pinioned there and betrayed and made to smile at our damnation - I who was reeling and shocked, as I see now, (to excuse myself,) by my own struggle with *The Waves* - who had vainly perhaps but honestly tried to understand you, H.B. the Prison: there I was mocking and mowing, and you forced me to it and you didn't mind it. I went home therefore more jangled and dazed and out of touch with reality than I have been for years. I could not sleep. I took chloral. I spent the next day in a state of horror and disillusion ... So then I put off [Sibyl] Colefax and Ottoline and resolved to be quit of the posturing and insincerity and being hauled about and made to exhibit myself forever.

*Letters* Vol 4: 1978, pp. 297-298.

In order to address the comment made in parenthesis here which is used as an explanation for her "latent sense of outrage" let us now return to Woolf's non-fictional, life writing in "A

Sketch of the Past" which, as John Mepham explains, were memoirs not yet polished for publication and were therefore probably less guarded, "less self-protective ... less apt to use beautiful writing as a screen" (Mepham: 1991, p.180). The source of Woolf's rebellion against Victorian codes of acceptable female behaviour and dress code is made explicit in these later autobiographical writings.

La Belle reflects on Woolf's admission in "A Sketch" of her early tomboy attitude, her hatred of the restraints of clothing and her ambivalent attitude towards mirrors, which was partly due to a refusal to define herself through Victorian constructions of femininity. Although Woolf remembers the "habit" of looking at herself in mirrors when she was a young girl, she also explains that this was always accompanied by "a strong feeling of guilt" (*Moments*: 1976, p.68):

Woolf believes that the fact that she and her sister "played cricket" and "climbed trees" contributed to her mixed feelings about mirrors. As a child she developed a personality through what were considered masculine pursuits - and thus to look into a mirror was to begin a different way, socially and sexually, of creating an identity. Woolf also suggests that looking into the mirror could become a trap. She might start defining herself through the glass rather than through being a tomboy or (as she later did) through writing.  
La Belle: 1988, p.156.

Woolf recounts in this autobiography a later particular occasion when, as a young woman, she was shamed and humiliated by her half-brother George. In the evenings, she explains, work had to finish and at 8 o'clock, she and Vanessa were expected to appear presentable in evening dress, hair done, arms and necks bare, to take their place among Victorian upper class society. She explains the limited budget and that on one occasion she had "erratically" bought some cheaper "house dress" fabric, not only for its economy but also because it was more "adventurous". Perhaps here we can recognise Mabel's rash and failed attempts at originality:

Down I came: in my green evening dress; all the lights were up in the drawing room; and there was George, in his black tie and evening jacket, in the chair by the fire. He fixed on me that extraordinary observant [illegible] gaze with which he always inspected clothes. He looked me up and down as if [I] were a horse turned into the ring. Then the sullen look came over him; a look in which one traced not merely aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper; morally, socially, he scented some kind of insurrection; of defiance of social standards. I was condemned from many more points of view than I can analyse as I stood there, conscious of those criticisms; and conscious too of

fear, of shame and of despair - "Go and tear it up", he said at last, in that curiously rasping and peevish voice which expressed his serious displeasure at this infringement of a code that meant more to him than he would admit.  
*Moments*: 1976, p.130.

Woolf explains her brother's embrace and adherence to the Victorian social code, as well as her comparative youth and poverty which accounted for her lack of defiance. In a further passage which also employs the imagery of the circus Woolf describes her eccentric and marginalised position:

But there was another element in our relationship which affected me as I stood there that winter's night exposed to his criticism in my green dress. I was not wholly conscious of it then. But besides feeling his age and his power, I felt too another feeling which I later called the outsider's feeling. When exposed to George's scowling, I felt as a tramp or a gipsy must feel who stands at the flap of a tent and sees the circus going on inside. Victorian society was in full swing; George was the acrobat who jumped through hoops, and Vanessa and I beheld the spectacle. We had good seats at the show, but we were not allowed to take part in it. We applauded, we obeyed - that was all."  
*Moments*: 1976, pp. 131-132.

First a horse, exposed to inspection, then a tramp excluded from any action. There are many reverberations here which suggest that Mabel's paranoia is a fictional representative of the reality of being a comparatively poor woman living in Victorian society and we can deduce that this exposition of delusional persecution and hostility is largely a reflection of the effect of such constraints. Woolf explains that, to her brother, "every party was an examination, a test: a matter of the greatest importance; it led to success; it led to failure." Success is social success, failure is "dowdiness, eccentricity" (*Moments*: 1976, p.135). In "A Sketch" she tells us that later, when she becomes involved in the Bloomsbury Circle, she finds that she is allowed an opinion and freedom from any dress code. (13)

We can see here a contradiction within Woolf's attitude when we consider her later adult criticism of Katherine Mansfield. In a letter to Sackville-West, which clearly exposes her snobbery as regards clothing, it becomes clear that she was susceptible to the codes which defined women according to the cut and cost of cloth: "Anderson seems to me extremely good - puts a line around herself completely, as Katherine Mansfield used to wish to do, when she



bought a tailor made coat" (*Letters* Vol. 4: 1978, p. 271). As we shall see this specific reference to her contemporary, Mansfield, is both interesting and significant. (14)

### **Economics, Class and Katherine Mansfield.**

In Lee's chapter on "Selves" she tells us that Woolf's external and internal conflicts were not only due to the wish to withdraw into an aesthetic solitude *and* be part of the lively social London scene, to write fiction *and* carefully record facts, but also these conflicts existed "between wildly inconsistent feeling about the working-classes" (Lee: 1996, p.536). The relationship between Mabel and Miss Milan, therefore, is significant in "The New Dress" (*Shorter Fiction*: 1991, pp. 170-177) because it further emphasises another concern within this story and within Woolf which is one of class distinction. Within the first paragraph of this story we are told of "the misery" and "profound dissatisfaction" which Mabel tries to conceal because she is ashamed of her "shabby" drawing-room, and "her mean, water-sprinkled blood that depressed her." She later confesses her "envy" because she sees herself as a fly whilst "the others were dragon flies, butterflies, beautiful insects." She is a "mongrel," not a thoroughbred. She is also connected to the canary, not only through colour but also through the juxtaposition of the remembrance of the canary's cage and her action of pecking at her shoulder in the glass at Mrs Dalloway's party. Thus, rather than wolves and vultures, she is the prey of the "cormorants" and "magpies," both larger than canaries and of course free.

The canary and the fly deserve further consideration at this point, especially because of their relation to this class issue. Miss Milan's care of the canary, as does her care of Mabel, exposes a side of human nature which is missing in those at the party, "patience and endurance" contentment with "such miserable, scanty, sordid little pleasures," a contentment with social and economic positioning which Mabel cannot accept or take pleasure in. Perhaps the suggestion is that it is Mabel's attempt at social repositioning which is at the root of some

her problems. In her internal admonition to propel herself into the things that would make her feel that "It would be it!" Mabel has been reflecting on those "divine moments" and on those times when everything seems to be in place but nothing happens: "One wasn't happy. It was flat, just flat, that was all." She goes on to blame not only "her wretched self ... lolling about in a kind of twilight existence" but also she expands this criticism to the rest of her family "all the same water-veined creatures who did nothing." But here, in the midst of this wallowing, she reaches the point of release:

Then in the midst of this creeping, crawling life, suddenly she was on the crest of a wave. That wretched fly - where had she read the story that kept coming into her mind about the fly and the saucer? - struggled out.

*Shorter Fiction*: 1991, p. 176.

The story to which Woolf is referring is most probably Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly" (1923) and this leads us into an area wherein Woolf's insecurities and ambiguous response to social hierarchies and conventions can be investigated. Let us begin with an exploration of some of Mansfield's shorter fiction.

"The Fly" consists mainly of the sadistic account of a man who drowns a fly by repeatedly releasing blobs of ink from his pen. This man has been reminded by an elderly former employee of the death of his son who has been buried in France and whose grave he has not visited. He is distracted from his grieving when he notices that a fly has fallen into his ink well. He lifts the fly onto a piece of blotting paper, watches it undertake "the immense task of cleaning the ink from its wings" until "it was ready for life again":

But just then the boss had an idea. He plunged his pen back into the ink, leaned his thick wrist on the blotting-paper, and as the fly tried its wings down came the heavy blot. What would it make of that? What indeed! The little beggar seemed absolutely cowed, stunned, and afraid to move because of what would happen next. But then, as if painfully, it dragged itself forward. The front legs waved, caught hold, and, more slowly this time, the task began again from the beginning.

Mansfield: 1981, p. 417.

This torture continues until the boss decides that the fourth blot should be the last but on this occasion the fly finally dies. After disposing of the fly and ordering a fresh sheet of blotting

paper the boss tries to, but cannot, remember what he had been thinking about before this incident. As Daly notes this could be a metaphorical account of Mansfield's own experience of illness. "She had felt herself to be like a fly 'dropped into the milk-jug and fished out again ... still too milky and drowned to start cleaning up yet.'" (Daly: 1994, p.101) However, in a letter to Dorothy Brett, 1922, it is interesting to note that the profession of "the boss", which remains obscure in the story, is named: "I have just finished a queer story called "The Fly" about a fly that fell into an ink pot and a Bank Manager" (Mansfield: 1989, p.248).

In the same letter Mansfield refers to the next story which will be of interest to us here "The Canary" which was published in the same year. Mansfield explains her reasons for this subject:

I think & think about them - their feelings, their dreams, the life they led before they were caught, the difference between the two little pale fluffy ones who were born in captivity & their grandfather & grandmother who knew the South American forests and have seen the immense perfumed sea ... Words cannot express the beauty of that high shrill little song rising out of the very stones. It seems one cannot escape Beauty - it is everywhere.  
Mansfield: 1989, p. 248

Having read "The New Dress" it seems likely that Woolf knew this story as there are so many similarities between Miss Milan and the protagonist of Mansfield's narrative, both in terms of suggested character and social standing. Although she, in her letters, claims not to have read Mansfield's work (to Raverat Vol 3, p.59, to Sackville-West Vol 4, p.366), it is possible that these themes were at least discussed when the two writers met.

Mansfield's "The Canary" (1923) is a landlady's monologue which tells of her immense loss and loneliness now that her canary is dead. The bird gave her company and comfort but she muses at the end of the story that despite the beauty of its little song that would cheer her there was also a sense of something else, almost inexplicable: "But isn't it extraordinary that under his sweet, joyful little singing it was just this - sadness? - Ah, what is it? - that I heard" (Mansfield: 1981, p. 422.)

Despite the seeming thematic similarities as well as those of style (internal streams of

consciousness), many contradictions can be heard in the different voices of Woolf in the *Writer's Diary* and her letters as she tries to negotiate her position in the problematic relationship with Mansfield. Anthony Alpers explains that despite their mutual interest in writing "the social barrier was of a kind that couldn't be removed" (Nathan: 1993, p. 199). Hermione Lee tells us that Woolf was wary of Mansfield because she was aware of a false self, a masked self, which was at odds with a secret self: "Virginia was right to be wary of her, especially when she herself was so conscious of the gap between her inner and outward selves" (Lee: 1996, p.388). Woolf, of all people, should know the dangers therein and would not want to be on the receiving end of the kind of mockery and ridicule she so often dealt out behind the scenes in private letters. Woolf is not only scathing on occasion about Mansfield as a personality but also frequently as regards her writing. Her frequent vacillations on this subject are of interest when we consider that she perhaps alters her opinions, and explicit attitudes, according to the recipient of her letters but her ambivalent attitude is also apparent in her diary which suggests perhaps a more sincere ambiguity.

Woolf's diary entry of August 7, 1918 is a scathing attack both on a professional and personal level:

I threw down *Bliss* with the explanation, 'She's done for!' Indeed I don't see how much faith in her as a woman or a writer can survive that sort of story. I shall have to accept the fact, I'm afraid, that her mind is very thin soil, laid an inch or two deep upon very barren rock. For *Bliss* is long enough to give her a chance of going deeper. Instead she is content with superficial smartness; and the whole conception is poor, cheap, not the vision, however imperfect, of an interesting mind. She writes badly too. And the effect was as I say, to give me an impression of her callousness and hardness as a human being. I shall read it again; but I don't suppose I shall change. She'll go on doing this sort of thing, perfectly to her and Murry's satisfaction. I'm relieved now that they didn't come. Or is it absurd to read all this criticism of her personally into a story?

*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p. 18-19.

We can see here that Woolf is at least partly concerned that her personal opinions of her, which are very much to do with social standing as we will see, is affecting the reading of Mansfield's work. In a letter to Jacques Raverat, July 1923, we can see that she is still concerned about this prejudice:

I knew both the Murrys. Please read Katherine's work, and tell me your opinion. My theory is that while she possessed the most amazing *senses* of her generation so that she could actually reproduce this room for instance, with its fly, clock, dog, tortoise if need be, to the life, she was weak as water, as insipid, and a great deal more commonplace, when she had to use her mind. That is, she can't put thoughts, or feelings, or subtleties of any kind into her characters, without at once becoming, where she's serious, hard, and where she's sympathetic, sentimental. Her first story which we printed, *Prelude*, was pure observation and therefore exquisite. I could not read her latest [*The Canary*]. But prejudice may be at work here too.  
*Letters* Vol 3: 1977, p.59.

Later in their relationship Woolf concedes that Mansfield's supposed "hard composure is much on the surface" (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.31). Also, it is quite clear from her entry on June 19, 1923, that Woolf is compelled to consider Mansfield's opinions about writing, even though she still casts aspersions on Mansfield's character:

I took up this book with a kind of idea that I might say something about my writing - which was prompted by glancing at what K.M. said about her writing in *The Dove's Nest*. But I only glanced. She said a good deal about feeling things deeply: also about being pure, which I won't criticize, though of course I very well could. But now what do I feel about my writing?  
*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.82.

Clearly there is evidence here that Mansfield has some influence on Woolf and yet she needs to stress that she only glanced, perhaps to assure herself that although the exercise was prompted by Mansfield, her writing would not be affected.

Woolf's letters in January 1923 (following Mansfield's death) to two of Mansfield's close friends, Dorothy Brett and Lady Ottoline Morrell would seem to contradict the feelings expressed above. She tells Brett that she is glad to have so many of Katherine's letters, and tells Morrell that she is sorry that they had not kept in touch, and much later (Oct 1928) that, after reading Mansfield's letters, she feels desolated by the waste of her death "- and how wretched it is - her poverty, her illness - I didn't realise how gifted she was either. And now never to - but you will know all I mean. I never knew that she had been so intimate with you" (*Letters* Vol 3: 1977, p. 546). In March, 1923, in another letter to Brett, Woolf goes into a lengthy explanation for this apparent split in which she blames the fact that she did not receive a response to one of her letters and then was put off by gossip which had maligned Mansfield's character. Woolf explains that she is typing out Mansfield's letters for her widower and seems

to express regret and indebtedness here: "it is terrible to me to think that I sacrificed anything to this odious gossip. She gave me something no one else can " (*Letters* Vol. 3: 1977, p.18).

So what did Mansfield give to Woolf?

· Perhaps the answer lies within Woolf's letter to Vita Sackville-West with whom she was more intimate and therefore her response can perhaps be read as a more honest reflection of her feelings:

As for Katherine, I think you've got it very nearly right. We did not ever coalesce; but I was fascinated, and she was respectful, only I thought her cheap, and she thought me priggish; and yet we were both compelled to meet simply in order to talk about writing. This we did by the hour. Only then she came out with a swarm of little stories, and I was jealous, no doubt; because they were so praised; but gave up reading them not on that account, but because of their cheap sharp sentimentality, which was all the worse, I thought, because she had, as you say, the zest and the resonance - I mean she could permeate one with her quality; and if one felt this cheap scent in it, it reeked in one's nostrils. But I must read her one day ... dinners with them were about the most unpleasant exhibitions, humanly speaking, I've ever been to. But the fact remains - I mean, that she had a quality I adored, and needed; I think her sharpness and reality - her having knocked about with prostitutes and so on, whereas I had always been respectable - was the thing I wanted then. I dream of her often - now that's an odd reflection - how one's relation with a person seems to be continued after death in dreams, and with some odd reality too.

*Letters* Vol 4: 1978, p366.

One immediate and striking contradiction here is that Woolf had already written to Sackville-West in 1927 saying that she had been reading Mansfield "with a mixture of sentiment and horror" (*Letters* Vol 3: 1977, p.408). It is clear that Mansfield was concerned to find a new form, and was an important figure for Woolf as regards ideas about modernism and art. In 1919 Mansfield wrote to Ottoline Morrell; "the time has come for a 'new word' but I imagine that the new word will not be spoken easily. People have never explored the lovely medium of prose. It is a hidden country still" (Mansfield: 1989, p.236). It was surely Woolf's desire to explore this land and both writers are as important to us now as those other modernist giants Joyce and Lawrence because they were both concerned to find a female voice which did not give in to what Woolf considered to be the egotistical self-consciousness of the eminent male writers of the time. They both wanted to articulate their explorations of consciousness through "intense short pieces" rather than through the tomes of such mammoth

proportions as *Ulysses*, to find a voice more "fluid" and "impersonal" than other female writers such as Dorothy Richardson and they were both "concerned with the problem of how solid narrative form could be broken up without losing deep feeling" (Lee: 1996, p.392). As Saralyn R. Daly notes it is not perhaps the similarities of image and structure that occur between the texts which should concern us but the fact that these women became fully active in such an important artistic and literary movement:

The two women display a kinship in craft as they think about how to treat their materials: the extent of the narrator's knowledge, as well as what to make available to and what to require of the reader; the increase of dramatic quality in the use of particular details; the avoidance of narrative passages; the increase of immediacy in the use of interior monologue and the freedoms that device allows in dealing with time. Each reflects the uncertainties of her age: neither will, neither feels that she should reach more than implicit conclusions in her writing. Like Henry James, they "create their readers", requiring that they grasp inferences and attain for themselves the revelations to which stories lead. In this kinship of craftsmanship - no matter how motive, style, or attitude toward the subject may differ - lies these women's likeness to James Joyce, to the writers of the 1920's, to many followers in modern fiction. Their difference is that they are consciously feminists.  
Daly: 1994, pp. 115-116.

This feminism is clear when we consider another of Mansfield's stories "New Dresses" (1924). Mansfield exposes the constraints of clothing on young females and ridicules snobbery and convention within a family which is less than financially secure. We can see that there are many connections between the sentiments expressed here and Woolf's life experience in terms of the tyrannical and brutal patriarchy which imposes and exerts control when we come to the non-fiction passages below. Helen is the tom-boy misfit who is mistreated because she is neither feminine and obedient like her sister Rose, nor is she as acceptable as "Boy", who is praised for his rowdy behaviour. The mother, Anne, has splashed out on some expensive green cashmere in order to make up two Sunday dresses which she trims with lace and "apple-green sashes." These are to be worn with "straw hats with ribbon tails" and are to last for at least two years. Despite the intimidation and storming of her husband, Henry, when he discovers the cost of the material, Anne is pleased with the effect the next day when the family go to church:

She could not help thrilling, they looked so superior ... Not a word more on the subject from Henry, even with thirty-five shillings' worth walking hand in hand before him all the way to church. Anne decided that was really generous and noble of him. She looked up at him, walking with his shoulders thrown back. How fine he looked in that long black coat with the white silk tie just showing! And the children looked worthy of him. She squeezed his hand in church, conveying by that silent pressure 'It was for your sake I made the dresses ... And she fully believed it.

Mansfield: 1981, pp. 543-544.

Rebellious Helen does not remove her dress when she gets home and consequently rips it in the garden when she takes "a flying leap" from the swing. She then hides the dress and later gives it away. "She felt neither frightened nor sorry", even though she knows she will be beaten by her exasperated Father: "If it were not Sunday, Helen, I would whip you. As it is, and I must be at the office early to-morrow, I shall give you a sound smacking after tea in the evening ... Do you hear me?" (Mansfield: 1981, p.547). As it is, she is saved by Dr Malcolm, who has recovered the dress and had it mended with new material because he admires Helen as a "young spark" rather than her preferred, spiritless and priggish sister, and because he disapproves of the family's treatment of the "young spark."

What is also interesting is the relationship between these two writers both prior to and following Katherine's death. Not only do the meetings suggest that ideas and themes would be shared which would explain the recurring references and images of the fly and the canary in "The New Dress" but also, it seems to me, that a dialogue was perhaps continuing long after the split between them. This was a dialogue which could not take place anywhere else but through their fictions, and one which would not only indicate an agreement in terms of an exposition of the female condition but also reflects their differing perspectives regarding class and economics. The continual references in Woolf's diary and letters to cheapness and this last reference to the watery Katherine suggests that "water-veined" Mabel may well have been partly representative of Woolf's lower class counterpart. Lets now consider Mansfield's perspective in another of her short stories "The Garden Party" (1922).

"The Garden Party" focuses on Laura, a young girl of upper middle-class background, who



struggles to find a proper response to the news that a man of lower class has been killed in the middle of her family's preparations for a stylish garden party. This man's family lives in a dingy cottage where even the smoke which comes from the chimney is "poverty-stricken" in comparison with "the great silvery plumes that uncurled" from her own home. Laura believes that, out of respect, the party should be cancelled but her pleas are ridiculed by the family. The turning point in Laura's dilemma comes when she catches sight of herself in the mirror wearing a new hat which her mother has given to her in order to placate her distraught daughter whose distress is ridiculed as "extravagant" and "absurd":

'I don't understand', said Laura, and she walked quickly out of the room into her own bedroom. There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined that she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided. And somehow that seemed quite the best plan....  
Mansfield: 1981, p.256.

Despite the fact that the hat is trimmed with daisies, symbols of Spring-time and new growth, the hat is black and serves as some kind of compensation - Laura can be in mourning all afternoon even though the party has not been cancelled.

After the party, however, Laura is again faced with the problem of knowing what is the right thing to do and this time she questions what she considers to be her mother's extravagance. The mother's "brilliant idea" is to send down a basket piled high with the sandwiches and cakes which have not been eaten, and the left-over arum lilies; "People of that class are so impressed by arum lilies." Laura escapes the embarrassment of the lilies because the stems would ruin her dress, but she is forced to go alone into the street where there are "mean little dwellings" and where "children swarmed" and there was "a man whose house was studded all over with minute bird-cages" (Mansfield: 1981, p.254). Laura feels conspicuous and inappropriately dressed in her shiny frock. The hat may be black but it is too big and

showy, flamboyant, with its "velvet streamer" to be an appropriate symbol of mourning in this situation. After an awkward encounter with the grief-stricken wife Laura is so eager to get away that she accidentally walks into the room where the dead man is lying. Despite the fact that she feels that the man is peaceful, "wonderful, beautiful", she is faced again with the problem of differing social codes of behaviour:

But all the same you had to cry, and she couldn't go out of the room without saying something to him. Laura gave a loud childish sob.  
'Forgive my hat,' she said.  
Mansfield: 1981, p.261.

What Laura questions, and what distinguishes her from the rest of her family, are the "absurd class distinctions". At the very beginning of the story she feels happy when she can flout the "despised stupid conventions" which make it difficult to communicate naturally with the workman and she defiantly eats her bread and butter on the lawn. But the sadness of this story is not only the impossibility of social mobility, in this case downwards as opposed to upwards as in "The New Dress," but the very absurdity which ensues when such an attempt is made. Perhaps the mother is right in the first instance when she says that "People like that don't expect sacrifices from us" (Mansfield: 1981, p.255). She knows her place and she also knows that "people like that" know theirs.

In Mansfield's letters to Woolf (1917-1919) it seems that she greatly admires her as a writer: "You write so damned well, so devilish well. ... there is your mind so accustomed to take the air in the 'grand manner' - - To tell you the truth - I am proud of your writing" (Mansfield: 1989, p.120). It is on this basis that Mansfield originally craves Woolf's friendship, she says she has been "haunted" by her and encourages her not to overlook the rarity of such a kinship:

My God I love to think of you, Virginia, as my friend. Dont cry me an ardent creature or say, with your head a little on one side, smiling as though you knew some enchanting secret: 'Well Katherine, we shall see' ... But pray consider how rare is it to find someone with the same passion for writing that you have, who desires to be scrupulously truthful with you - and to give you the freedom of the city without any reserves at all. Mansfield: 1989, p.56.

But this was a kinship which perhaps Woolf ignored or was rejected by both as being impossible due of class distinction and this, we suppose, Woolf later regretted. It is clear, however, in a later letter to her husband, that there is a scornful attitude on Mansfield's part when she criticises the behaviour of Woolf's upper-class circle. She tells Murry that she is "Bored to Hell" by the "delicate airs", the "curtsy" and "caper" (Mansfield: 1989, p.151).

There is certainly no evidence that Mansfield wishes to be upwardly mobile and she makes it clear to Woolf that she is aware of her own shortcomings, with no apparent apology, and that she is also aware of how she and Murry are considered by polite society. Following an unfavourable review by Murry of Sassoon's work, which was not considered acceptable according to, among others, the eminent Morrell, Mansfield explains why she is refusing an invitation to dine at Garsington:

I don't think I can break 'crumb' in their house again. I should lose control of myself - I should do something dreadful - sin against very Decency - commit some hideous crime - eat the clove out of a stuffed orange or-or-God knows!

But it is only too plain from all this that Johnny Murry and I are arrogant outcasts with cannon balls for eyes.

Mansfield: 1989, p.107.

Mansfield continues this humour by further comparing herself and Murry to Nancy and Bill Sykes from Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. But her attack is perhaps even more scathing due to this humorous tone which seems to direct the farce rather at those in judgement than on the recipients.

It is clear that Mansfield considered herself an equal in terms of artistic profession at this time, and we shall see that the scorn extended beyond society when she criticises Woolf's work in a letter to her husband Murry (November 1919). Here she expresses her dismay that Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919), which she is reviewing, seems to ignore the effect and impact of the war. Although Mansfield tried to be delicate in her public appraisal, Woolf sensed that this was an unfavourable review; she was hurt and this was the cause of the initial split between the two women. Mansfield considered this novel to be "a lie in the soul" and that

artists who merely "settle down" after such an event as a world war, and do not strive to find an expression for "new thoughts & feelings," are "traitors". She criticises a "trifling scene" which frightens her due to its triviality:

it positively frightens me- to realise this *utter coldness & indifference*. But I will be very careful and do my best to be dignified and sober. Inwardly I despise them all for a set of *cowards*.  
Mansfield: 1989, p.147.

In a later letter Mansfield again criticises the artists and writers (including Woolf) who do not express "Real Life!" in a letter to her close friend Dorothy Brett (Mansfield: 1989, p.222).

However, it seems that the root of Mansfield's criticism stems from these artists' inability or refusal to address "real death" and this brings us to another significant theme within both Woolf's and her counterpart's work. (15)

## Death

We have already seen from Woolf's letter to Ethel Smyth (Oct 1930) that the writing of *Night and Day* (1919) served as an exercise in avoiding "insanity" and "dangerous ground" (*Letters* Vol.4: 1978, p.231). Whilst one can understand Mansfield's criticism of what seems to be a flippant and insensitive response to the horror of war (Mansfield had lost her own brother), it is important to note that in the aforesaid letter Woolf explains that it was during this time of evasion that she conceived of her later novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) in which she confronts this horror through her poignant and deeply disturbing narrative of the "insane" Septimus Warren Smith, a victim of the war who eventually plunges from a window and impales himself on the railings below his building in order to escape the further indignity of being incarcerated in a mental asylum. We know from her diary that this subject and the writing of the "mad" scenes in the novel was particularly difficult for Woolf, not only because she was confronting the larger human issues, but also because she was forced to confront her own fear and experience of madness. In *A Writer's Diary*, June 19, 1923, Woolf agrees with Mansfield's notion that in order to write one must feel things deeply. She gives an indication of her purpose in writing

Septimus "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense" (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.82). But despite the seeming clarity of her intentions the practice is problematic: "Of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squint so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it" (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.83). On October 15 she writes "I am now in the thick of the mad scene in Regent's Park. I find I write it by clinging as tight to fact as I can" (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.87). These admissions and the eventual suicide within the narrative hardly suggest an evasion of the topic of death.

There are undoubtedly further reverberations here. Mrs Dalloway's initial response to the news (which she hears from the wife of the doctor who is arguably to blame) could be likened to the response of which Mansfield is accusing Woolf and her circle, it is also an echo of the Sheridans' reaction when they hear news of death before their party and refuse to let this intrude on their fun. But Mrs Dalloway cannot dismiss the significance and tragedy of such an event and she quickly withdraws to contemplate death:

... Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death she thought.

She went on into the little room where the Prime Minister had gone with Lady Bruton. Perhaps there was somebody there. But there was nobody. The chairs still kept the impress of the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton, she turned deferentially, he sitting four-square, authoritatively. They had been talking about India. There was nobody. The party's splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery.

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party - the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself - but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party.

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.201-202.

This vivid and graphic account which Clarissa feels and sees is a marked contrast to the "talk" of the Bradshaws, the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton. This is surely evidence that Woolf is writing from deep feeling and here Clarissa, like Laura, is looking on death. But also, like Laura, she does not pity the young man because "[T]here was an embrace in death" and he

need "[F]ear no more the heat of the sun" (*Dalloway*: 1992, pp. 202, 203). Despite Clarissa's identification with the dead man she must go on living, respond to the striking of the clock ("She must assemble"), and return to the party. As Elizabeth Abel points out, Woolf's subversion of traditional developmental plots wherein the heroine dies and the hero continues (Hardy's Tess and Angel) is also interesting: "By making Septimus the hero of a sacrificial plot that enables the heroine's development, Woolf reverses narrative tradition" (Abel in Bowlby: 1992, p.91).

Despite Mansfield's admonitions the representation of Clarissa's response has perhaps more truth and realism in its articulation than that of Laura's in "The Garden Party":

There lay the young man, fast asleep - sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far away from them both. Oh so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy ... Happy ...  
All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.  
Mansfield: 1981, p.261.

It is interesting that, faced with the "real" corpse Laura is not pre-occupied with the actualities of the accident such as the smashed skull, and yet Clarissa is able through her imagination to conjure a disturbingly graphic image of Septimus' fatal injuries. There is perhaps a clue within the language of fiction to yet another distinction in attitude between Mansfield and Woolf, their attitudes towards death.

Like Woolf, Mansfield too suffered a life threatening illness and in a letter to her husband J.M. Murry, she talks of yielding to "the *silent world*" and explains her struggle to accept this suffering and to overcome the fear of death:

... Isn't it possible that if one yielded there is a whole world into which one is received? It is so near and yet I am conscious that I hold back from giving myself up to it. What is this something mysterious that waits - that beckons?

And then suffering - bodily suffering such as I've known for three years. It has changed forever everything - even the *appearance* of the world is not the same - there is something added. *Everything has its shadow*. It is right to resist such suffering? Do you know I feel it has been an immense privilege. Yes, in spite of all. How blind we little creatures are! Darling, it's only the fairy tales we *really* live by. If we set out upon a journey the more wonderful the treasure the greater the temptations

and perils to be overcome. And if someone rebels and says Life isn't good enough on those terms one can only say: *It is*. Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean a 'thorn in the flesh, my dear' - it's a million times more mysterious. It has taken me three years to understand this - to come to see this. We resist - we are terribly frightened. The little boat enters the dark gulf and our only cry is to escape - 'put me on land again'. But it's useless. Nobody listens. The shadowy figure rows on. One ought to sit still and uncover one's eyes.

I believe the greatest failing of all is to be frightened. Perfect Love casteth out Fear. When I look back on my life all my mistakes have been because I was afraid ... Was that why I had to look on death. Would nothing less cure me? You know, one can't help wondering, sometimes ... No, not a personal God or any such nonsense. Much more likely - the soul's desperate choice ...  
Mansfield: 1989, p181.

The references to fairy-tale journeys, the biblical references and indeed the whole tone of this passage, as with the fictional one above, are suggestive of some kind of passive, unreal and imaginative transcendence. Death is not to be actively sought, nor actively resisted. The gaps in this thinking, indicated by three dots, also suggests a kind of giving-up, or letting go in terms of intellectual pursuit and articulation. This is precisely what happens at the end of "The Garden Party" when Laura's brother comes to rescue her from the dead man's street. Here are the very last words of the story:

Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said in his warm, loving voice. "Was it awful?"  
"No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie -" She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life - " But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.  
"*Isn't it, darling?*" said Laurie.  
Mansfield: 1981, p.261.

Laura, who has had no difficulty expressing the marvel of death is now unable to find the words to describe life.

Woolf's approach is quite different, as we have already seen in the fictional extract above, but also this is clear when we read some of her letters on the subject of suicide; an altogether more active pursuit of death. Here the realist tone is far more objective than Mansfield's; Woolf is keen to gather other people's attitudes towards suicide. In a letter to Ethel Smyth (Oct, 1930) she writes:

By the way, what are the arguments against suicide? You know what a fliberti-gibbet I am: well there suddenly comes in a thunder clap a sense of the complete uselessness of my life. It's like suddenly running one's head against a wall at the end of a blind alley. Now what are the arguments

against that sense - 'Oh it would be better to end it'? I need not say that I have no intention of taking any steps: I simply want to know - as you are so masterly and triumphant - catching your train and not running too fast - what are the arguments against it?  
*Letters Vol 4: 1978, p.242.*

Despite her assurance that she has no intention of undertaking such an act at this time, Woolf does admit a former tendency of violence towards herself in a later letter to Ethel, when, following the disastrous Rosebery party, she told Leonard that if it were not for him she would kill herself (March, 1931). That Woolf was preoccupied with this subject is evident in a further letter to Beatrice Webb (April, 1931):

I wanted to tell you, but was too shy, how much I was pleased by your views upon the possible justification of suicide. Having made the attempt myself [in 1913], from the best of motives as I thought - not to be a burden on my husband - the conventional accusation of cowardice and sin has always rather rankled. So I was glad of what you said.  
*Letters Vol 4: 1978, p.305.*

And, of course, Woolf did take her own life, leaving a letter for Leonard wherein it is clear that the above motive and reason was to return:

... I am wasting your life ...  
You can work, & you will be much  
Better without me.  
Lee: 1996, p.760.

## **Septimus Smith and Suicide**

Woolf's most sustained and vivid representation of madness is to be found in her portrayal of Septimus Smith, a war hero central to the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, who has returned to London presumably suffering from shell shock having experienced the monstrosities of World War One. Through this character Woolf was able not only to find expression of the experience of mental breakdown but also to mount a scathing attack on the medical profession's response to such victims of human violence and cruelty. Woolf also delivers here an acute criticism of the rest cure, the infantilising regime under which she had herself suffered. She brings the theme of human relationships and disconnectedness to the forefront and seems to offer some kind of attempt to justify the right to choose suicide. The episodes we are about to consider



were some of the most difficult for Woolf to write because she had to draw on the memories of her own experience of mental breakdown. In her diary she asks herself whether the text is being written "from deep emotion?" and answers herself with the following admission: "Of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squint so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it" (*Writer's Diary*: 1978, p.83).

When we first meet Septimus his wife Rezia is drawing his attention to an aeroplane in the sky which is leaving a smoke trail in the sky: "For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.23). The reader, however, is made immediately aware that Septimus' relationship to the world is different to that of his wife and others in Regent's Park, for what he sees is a signal, a special message meant especially for him, a signal of "exquisite beauty ... bestowing upon him charity and laughing goodness" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.23). This realisation makes Septimus cry, which is clearly not the response which his wife expects given that the plane is sending out an advertisement for toffee. This juxtaposition of the mundane and the spiritual, of Septimus' perceptions as opposed to others around him, leaves the reader in no doubt that we have encountered what the world would consider a madman. His perceptions, however, are represented with such sensual delicacy that we cannot help but be drawn into his field of experience. As Rezia spells out the letters of the word 'toffee' once again we are pulled back into the hyper-sensitive world of Septimus Smith; the roughness of Rezia's voice is "like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke." Whilst we are aware of Septimus' distance here from the real objects around him there is also an inner clarity; his super sensitivity, however, is contrasted with Septimus' attempt to remain logical and scientific in order to resist the impulse to drift away into these waves of knowingness and revelation: "A marvellous discovery indeed - that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one

must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life!" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.24). It is only Rezia's hand on his knee which weighs him down otherwise he knows that this superb vision would drive him mad. He closes his eyes. But the living trees and the leaves "being connected by millions of fibres with his own body" and the sounds around him, all form new meaning; for Septimus, it is "the birth of a new religion" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.24).

Septimus makes notes to record his new found knowledge:

Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five time over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piecing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, p.26

It is interesting to note that following Woolf's first suicide attempt in 1904, she imagined that she heard birds singing in Greek (*Diary Vol 1*: 1979, p.90). Septimus is haunted by the ghost of his dead commanding officer Evans. As well as the beckoning of living natural things, he is bidden by the unseen. He is also convinced that he is in communication with Jesus "the eternal sufferer." But Septimus rejects a call to "eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.27).

Rezia does not want others to notice her husband's strange behaviour and the narrator asks whether was there anything which would lead people to suspect that "here is a young man who carries in him the greatest message in the world, and is, moreover, the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable?" (*Dalloway*: 1992,p.91). Before the war, Septimus was an ordinary man, doing well at his job, a romantic young man, a reader of Shakespeare.

"London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.92). During the war, we are told that "he developed manliness" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.94).

When Evans died he congratulated himself that he did not feel much; he was reasonable. He was indifferent to the shells exploding, the war had been an education : "It was sublime"

(*Dalloway*: 1992, p.95). But then we are made aware of a rising panic caused by Septimus' realisation that "he could not feel." The repetition of this phrase punctuates two pages of text; Septimus cannot see beauty, he cannot taste food or drink, he cannot feel any emotion and this leads him to the conclusion "that the world itself is without meaning" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.97). After his war experience he perceives a hidden message in the language of all literature: "This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.97).

When Rezia tells Septimus that she wants a child, his cynicism and disgust with human nature is clear:

One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that.  
[...] For the truth is (let her ignore it) that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces.[...] In the street, vans roared past him; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud), ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would *he* go mad?  
*Dalloway*: 1992, p.98.

When he can only respond mechanically and with distant insincerity to his wife's sobbing, he knows he must give in, he knows that the doctors must come. When Dr. Holmes says that he is not ill, the guilt becomes acute and Septimus takes on the sins that he has levelled at humanity:

So there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail of the bed in the early hours of the morning at the prostrate body which lay realising its degradation. [...] The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, pp. 99-100.

His experience of the medical profession would certainly seem to uphold Septimus' ideas about human nature. Dr. Holmes is depicted as a despicable man, a snob who is more

interested in his sense of importance than any cure. His advice is that Septimus should stop thinking about himself, find a hobby, get control of the situation and stop frightening the charming little lady his wife" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p101). In fact, Rezia is at first charmed, so desperate is she for help that she is fooled into believing that Holmes is a kind man. But Septimus knows more "Human nature, in short, was on him - the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.101). Terrified at finding Septimus talking to himself, Rezia sends for Holmes who knowing that he is out of his depth, suggests unkindly that they find some money and go to Harley Street.

The situation worsens as the couple seek help from Sir William Bradshaw who "very properly" charges a "very large fee" for his advice. A knighted man of reputation, skilled, hardworking, accurate in his diagnosis, his brilliance is ironically presented as also being due to his "sympathy; tact; understanding of the human soul" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.104). Woolf's tone throughout this character's depiction belies a sinister undercurrent:

'You served with great distinction in the War?'  
The patient repeated the word 'war' interrogatively.  
He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A serious symptom to be noted on the card.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, p.105.

Septimus is not able to express what is really on his mind; the "appalling crime" he thinks he is guilty of (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.105). Bradshaw points out that Septimus has nothing at all to worry about, he is a brave man with a bright future, he has a lovely wife and no money worries: "It was merely a question of rest, said Sir William; of rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.106). The eminent doctor duly commits him to an asylum in the country, away from Rezia because, after all he had threatened suicide, a point of law, and "the people we care for most are not good for us when we are ill" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.106). Although his advice is "kindly" given, the patronising tone is not dissimilar to that employed

by Holmes and it is clear that time and money are his major preoccupations. Bradshaw will not speak of "madness", only a lack of proportion. Septimus merely needs to learn to rest. But, again, Septimus is not easily fooled, he sneers at Sir William's suggestion. Woolf directs the reader throughout, so that all our sympathies lay with Septimus and our regard for Bradshaw is unfavourable:

The fellow made a distasteful impression. For there was in Sir William, whose father had been a tradesman, a natural respect for breeding and clothing, which shabbiness nettled; again, more profoundly, there was in Sir William, who had never had time for reading, a grudge, deeply buried, against cultivated people who came into his room and intimated that doctors, whose profession is a constant strain upon all the highest faculties, are not educated men.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, pp.106-107.

Septimus realises that the doctor's purpose will be enforced. Bradshaw, like Holmes, becomes a representative of human nature and "Human nature is remorseless." He tries to explain but his memory fails him, he cannot remember of what he was guilty and Bradshaw's time is running out. As Septimus falters in his attempt to communicate, he is interrupted: "'Try to think as little about yourself as possible,' said Sir William kindly. Really, he was not fit to be about" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.108).

Both Septimus and Rezia know they have been deserted but Bradshaw's self-justification allows no room for personal attachment. We can read a powerful indictment of the medical profession and their supposed cure for mental illness in the following passage:

To his patients he gave three-quarters of an hour; and if in this exacting science which has to do with what, after all, we know nothing about - the nervous system, the human brain - a doctor loses his sense of proportion, as a doctor he fails. Health we must have; and health is proportion: so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ ( a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve.  
[...] Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion - his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw's if they were women ( she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son), so that not only did his colleagues respect him, his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude for insisting that these prophetic Christs and Christesses, who prophesied the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered; Sir William with his thirty years' experience of these kinds of cases, and his infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense; in fact his sense of proportion.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, pp. 108-109.

Lady Bradshaw has been broken by her husband's power, will and authority some fifteen years ago: "It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.110). Their guests can escape after dinner but his patients have no escape from his lust for domination which has subdued his wife and spoils their social occasions. The goddess of proportion and her sister, the goddess of conversion, ensure that his patients cannot argue with him (18). Living or not living is not your own affair; you must think of your family, have courage, be honourable and if that doesn't work:

he had to support him police and the good of society, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care, down in Surrey, that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, were held in control. And then stole out from her hiding-place and mounted her throne that Goddess whose lust is to override opposition, to stamp indelibly in the sanctuaries of others the image of herself. Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impress of Sir William's will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up. It was this combination of decision and humanity that endeared Sir William so greatly to the relations of his victims.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, pp.111-112.

The relationship between Septimus and his wife, however, is of central importance to Woolf's representation of madness and its effects on loved ones. At first, Rezia is clearly depicted as being embarrassed and ashamed of her husband's behaviour. It is she who seeks help from the medical profession and tries initially to follow their advice. She is flattered by Dr. Holmes and then considers Bradshaw a wise man. But, ultimately Rezia and Septimus begin to communicate. Rezia refuses to be separated from him and clearly understands that his suicide is not an act of cowardice. In the park scene Rezia's embarrassment is so acute that she would rather Septimus were dead. He makes everything "terrible" and she seems to be bitter that he will not kill himself. She is convinced that he is not ill, Dr. Holmes had said so, so he must be selfish. She is alone, he is mad, and although he threatened to throw himself under a cart, he is still here talking to himself out loud in the park. Septimus' threat of suicide is treated as a criminal act, Holmes and Bradshaw chastise him for frightening his wife in such a way.

At first Septimus seems to resist the call to death, when it seems that Rezia has deserted

him and accepted an invitation from Holmes to visit him and his family for tea (a dubious invitation which smacks of sexual avarice):

So he was deserted. The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself. kill yourself. for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot; and this killing oneself, how does one set about it, with a table knife, uglily, with floods of blood, - by sucking a gaspipe? He was too weak; he could scarcely raise his hand. Besides, now that he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know. Holmes had won of course; the brute with the red nostrils had won. But even Holmes himself could not touch this last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world.

It was at that moment (Rezia had gone shopping) that the great revelation took place. A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him.

[...] Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication, he muttered.

*Dalloway*: 1992, pp. 101-102.

After the couple's unsatisfactory visit with Bradshaw, the final scene, which culminates in Septimus' leap to death, sees a development in the relationship between the couple which is yet another reverberation of one of Woolf's central themes; the separateness and connectedness which exists between human beings. At the beginning of this episode Rezia and Septimus are still distant. She sits in the living room making a hat while Septimus watches the light and shadow, the signals on the wallpaper. Again it is his hyper-sensitivity to nature which separates him from his wife. He is passive, immobile, taking in all the sensual perceptions around him, she is active and at work:

Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on the shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.

He was not afraid. At every moment nature signified by some laughing hint like that gold spot which went round the wall - there, there, there - her determination to show, brandishing her plumes, shaking her tresses, flinging her mantle this way and that, beautifully, always beautifully, and standing close up to breathe through her hollowed hands Shakespeare's words, her meaning.

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.153.

Rezia watches him while she works, angry to see him smiling: "It was not marriage; it was not being one's husband to look strange like that, always to be starting, laughing, sitting hour after hour silent, or clutching her and telling her to write" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.153). Gradually the two come together when after watching Rezia sew Septimus asks who the hat is for.

Cautiously and courageously Septimus re-enters the living room and opens his eyes to take in the real objects around him, the gramophone, the sideboard. He knows that real things are too exciting but he is determined that: "He would not go mad" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.155). Unlike the leaves they do not move. The conversation between the couple develops into shared laughter. He takes an interest in her work, in other people, she enjoys his input and his humour. He helps her design the hat and the couple are united for the first time in the novel:

It was wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peters' hat.

'Just look at it,' he said.

Yes, it would always make her happy to see that hat. He had become himself then, he had laughed then. They had been alone together. Always she would like that hat.

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.158.

When the peace is interrupted by a knock at the door, the first fear is that it is Bradshaw come to take him to the asylum, but it is a neighbour and Rezia leaves him for a while. Left alone Septimus is at once terrified at the thought of being alone with just the real objects around him. He realises that Evans has left him. When Rezia returns she determines that they can be happy together, that they can help each other, that they will not be separated. She begins to pack so that they can go to Bradshaw's country house together. But Septimus knows they are in Bradshaw's power, that he will separate them, that Rezia will have no power to prevent their separation. However, when Rezia refuses to burn all his writings, and lovingly binds them together like romantic letters with a ribbon, Septimus knows that through this act of love, she has triumphed over Holmes and Bradshaw:

Shuffling the edges straight, she did up the papers, and tied the parcel almost without looking, sitting close, sitting beside him, he thought, as if all her petals were about her. She was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver, who had reached a sanctuary where she feared no one; not Holmes; not Bradshaw; a miracle, a triumph, the last and greatest. Staggering he saw her mount the staircase laden with Holmes and Bradshaw, men who never weighed less than eleven stone six, who sent their wives to Court, men who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion; who differed in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another), yet judges they were; who mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet rules, yet inflicted. Over them she triumphed.

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.162.

Despite her determination to keep Holmes away, Rezia is pushed aside. Despite Septimus'



knowledge that his clarity, his ability to separate the vision and the sideboard, is more worthy, he has no option but to escape the foolish doctors through suicide:

There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the stairs an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!' he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings.

'The coward!' cried Dr. Holmes, bursting the door open. Rezia ran to the window, she saw; she understood.

*Dalloway*: 1992, pp.163-164.

Although Rezia's and Septimus' togetherness in the final scene above is clear, it seems that Woolf's theme of human connectedness and separation runs throughout the novel. In the same area of London, during the same day, the main characters live their lives mostly independent of one another. These lives only intersect at the party for which Clarissa is preparing and after Septimus' death. Also, many cameo minor characters are introduced at certain moments of the plot in order to give an added perspective. For example, we have several observations from people who pass Rezia and Septimus, people who never appear again and whose only function is perhaps to show how in one small area of London people live alongside one another with no real awareness of one another's experiences. Of course Holmes and Bradshaw are untouched by the war, as are many of London's ruling classes, and I would agree with Showalter that in this sense Septimus becomes a "scapegoat, whose visionary emotional turbulence and lack of psychic defences has to be seen in contrast to the fatuousness, insensitivity, impassivity, and self-productive caution of the dominant codes. Septimus feels so much because others feel so little" (Showalter in *Dalloway*: 1992, p.xliii).

Septimus' suicide, finally, is an active heroic act; he refuses to be the victim of London's eminent medics; it is a courageous act of defiance. His question "Only human beings?" is perhaps an echo reverberating from many of Woolf's texts, the question of the insignificance of

individual existence in the face of nature. But it also highlights another important point, that Rezia's and Septimus' day has been experienced in parallel, but in no way connected, to Clarissa's preparations for a party. These two central characters exist in the same place and time but it is only Septimus' death which brings them together. Clarissa's attention is brought to Septimus' death by overhearing Bradshaw saying that there should be some provision made in a Bill with regard to "the deferred effects of shell shock" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.201) He tells Mr. Dalloway that a young man who had been in the army had killed himself that day.

The term 'shellshock' was used as a cover-all for a great increase in mental breakdown among soldiers during and after World War One. As Elaine Showalter points out "shell shock" somewhat inadequately stood for "various forms of male hysteria in which the terror, anguish, and immobility of combat led to a variety of physical and emotional conversion symptoms: limps, contractions, paralysis, stammering, loss of voice, sexual impotence, blindness, deafness, heart palpitations, insomnia, nightmares, dizziness, or acute depression" (Showalter in *Dalloway*: 1992, p.xxxvii). Soldiers who were considered to be shirking their duties, or giving in to cowardice, were often severely punished; they faced court martial and electric shock treatment. Following the war, London was overwhelmed by thousands of veterans needing psychiatric care. Although Septimus shows many symptoms which would point towards "deferred war neurosis," I would agree with Showalter that his acute disturbance, hallucinations, delusions of grandeur and guilt are also suggestive of schizophrenia (Showalter in *Dalloway*: 1992, p.xl).

Martin Stone's study of "Shellshock and Psychiatry" in *The Anatomy of Madness: Institutions and Society* (Vol 2, pp.242-271) explains how the phenomenon of shellshock changed the face of British psychiatry and had a transforming effect on treatment. It also served to undermine Freud's theories regarding sexuality which had previously become very popular. The asylums were full. Interestingly, Stone also notes that the initial standard

treatment, the isolation, rest and milk cure, imported from America by Weir Mitchell, was largely ineffective (Stone in Bynum, Porter et al: 1985, p.252). Stone points out that many of the problems faced by the medical profession at the time were in fact related to the term 'shellshock' itself. The term became an eclectic, diagnostic label which did not address the actual mental symptoms suffered by its victims. This universal pathologising of what was in fact a vast array of individual traumas is perhaps not dissimilar to those labels pinned onto women in the late 1890s. The hysterical woman had suddenly been replaced by a hysterical man and, I would suggest, that in order to preserve the masculine hierarchy and perhaps rightly to protect those who had served in a terrible and horrific war for their country, some new term must be found, however inadequate. Women are hysterical but men suffer from 'shellshock,' a term which is clearly linked to war, manliness, patriotism. Septimus had learnt manliness, just as all Britain's soldiers learnt how to uphold masculine virtues. Our war veterans were inadequately labelled and inadequately treated. War experiences had to be repressed, veterans silenced and isolated, otherwise who would fight in the next war?

Perhaps it is of interest to note that Septimus' death itself has masculine connotations. He leaps from the window and impales himself on the spikes of the railings, spikes remind us of war and, of course, are phallic. Rhoda's suicide in *The Waves*, however, we assume to be a watery end. Her act of suicide is a leap, for the final speaker (Bernard?) tells us that he/she feels "the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt" (*Waves*: 1977, p.228) But we assume that this is a leap into water, given that so much of Rhoda's suicidal impulse is expressed through images of the sea, or pools, or even a puddle:

"There is the puddle," said Rhoda, "and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head. Its wind roars in my face. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? [...]"

I am alone in a hostile world. The human face is hideous. This is to my liking. I want publicity and violence and to be dashed like a stone on the rocks. I like factory chimneys and cranes and lorries. I

like the passing of face and face and face, deformed, indifferent. I am sick of prettiness; I am sick of privacy. I ride rough waters and shall sink with no one to save me.'  
*Waves*: 1977, p.126.

Let us now return to the theme of death in relation to the central fictional protagonists Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay.

### ***Mrs Dalloway and To The Lighthouse***

Clarissa's recounting of her "transcendental theory" in *Mrs Dalloway* is prompted by the sound of the ambulance which has been sent for Septimus (of whom she is still ignorant) and the realisation that life and death exist together. Like Mansfield, Clarissa seems to want to believe in some form of life after death, but rather than an entry into a world beyond, the emphasis in Woolf's writing is on mergence or re-absorbtion into this material world. This theory has been developed by Clarissa because of her dissatisfaction with relationships between people and her realisation that no one can be fully known. Despite this, or because of this, inability to know or be known she believes in a connection between people which suggests that no one is independent from the whole of humanity. This feeling of connectedness is due to the experience of feeling herself everywhere and part of everything:

... But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftsbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere: not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter - even tree, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places. after death. Perhaps - perhaps.  
*Dalloway*: 1992, p.167.

Again we can see a fictional outworking of the notion of "existent traces" in "A Sketch of the Past." Clarissa seems to echo Woolf's desire to "tap" the pool of memory and past experience, attach ourselves once more in order to re-live "from the start" (*Moments*: 1976, p.67).

The tension throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, as with so much of Woolf's fiction, is between the

seen, performative, constructed and discrete self, and that which is dispersed, spreading, uncontained and unseen. The distinction between the social and attached self and the self which is alone and isolated, free-floating, is what we will find later within her depiction of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Let us return to the mirror to see more clearly this distinction in Woolf's description of Clarissa preparing herself for the party:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face a point. That was her self - pointed; dartlike; definite. That was herself when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to. perhaps; she had helped young people, who were grateful to her; had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her - faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions, like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch; which, she thought (combing her hair finally), is utterly base! Now, where was her dress?

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.40.

As the self is unified and assembled in a single diamond shape, the house is also prepared and becomes a material, finite extension of the self, all in preparation for the party which will become the stage upon which the self is to perform. But the question of reality always remains. Here is Clarissa at the party:

And yet for her own part, it was too much of an effort. She was not enjoying it. It was too much like being - just anybody, standing there; anybody could do it; yet this anybody she did a little admire, couldn't help feeling that she had anyhow, made this happen, that it marked a stage, this post that she felt herself to have become, for oddly enough she had quite forgotten what she looked like, but felt herself a stake driven in at the top of the stairs. Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background; it was possible to say things you couldn't say anyhow else, things that needed an effort; possible to go much deeper. But not for her; not yet anyhow.

*Dalloway*: 1992, p.187.

In *To the Lighthouse*, we have a recurrence of these themes through the characterisation of Mrs Ramsay. She too is disappointed by the painful realisation of "the inadequacy of human relationships" (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.45) and is concerned with the distinction between the seen and performative and that part of us which is not determined by contact with others. When the dinner party is ended and the children have gone to bed Mrs Ramsay is relieved and luxuriates in a self which is alone, unseen and free from any need to interact:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of - to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself, and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomly deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. [...] This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles), but as a wedge of darkness.

*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp. 69-70.

What I find interesting in this passage is the relationship between the colour, the darkness of the core which is "all spreading" and "unfathomly deep," and the shape of the core ("wedge-shaped"), which suggests a circumscribed self. In fact the public self shrinks, all extraneous visible personality disappears and there is a very definite sense of unity and wholeness in the privacy of isolation. However, this latter experience of being Mrs Ramsay describes as being *not oneself*. At the end of this extract of the passage her musings bring us back to the question of which she should consider is the real self, the one that is alone, or the one which is relational. If we continue reading this passage, we shall see that Mrs Ramsay's sense of self is continually bombarded by external objects and internalised discourses.

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir, and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet the stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at - that light for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that - 'Children don't forget, children don't forget' - which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, It will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.

But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie.

*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.70.

So it is the Lighthouse, which has been seen already as a source of patriarchal discipline and control, and language, specifically the language of the church, which interrupts and limits the

self's freedom to travel in the imagination. As in Mrs Dalloway's transcendental theory it seems that Mrs Ramsay also needs to believe in the possibility of mergence with external, non-human objects:

It was odd. she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover.  
*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp. 70-71.

In this case it would seem that Mrs Ramsay's tendency towards transcendence, her belief in some kind of perfect union, is a coping mechanism which momentarily allows her to forget her disappointment in human relationships, to soften the "sternness" within her, to blur the "firm composure" and to overcome the sense of her "remoteness" which comes from the realisation that one cannot believe in a saving God:

How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was not treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that.  
*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.71.

We have already seen the dissolving of the interface between subject and object in Septimus Smith's account of existential angst which comes from a first hand experience of the baseness of human activity.

As Mrs Ramsay knits with "slightly pursed lips," the expression which "so stiffened and composed the lines of her face," Mr Ramsay knows she is remote, aloof, outside of the reach of his need to protect her and her sadness pains him. He cannot interrupt her or do anything to help her (*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp.71-72). Also, Septimus notes when he watches Rezia "the pursed lips that women have, the set, the melancholy expression, when sewing" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p.156). Following his observation of female work, contemplation and creativity Woolf offers perhaps one of the most remarkable and harmonious scenes of married life because, to Septimus, the expression is "perfectly natural," the scene is safe and offers him a way back into

normal communication, mutual activity and understanding.

Lily's reflections in *To the Lighthouse* are also interesting when we consider the freedom of the imagination and the relationship between women and art. Mrs Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway are domestic artists whose creativity is largely expressed through the provision of food and ambience; we assume also that the final products of Mrs Ramsay's knitting, like Rezia's hats, are mostly destined for someone other than herself. But Lily is more explicitly a painter and her art seems to serve no such definite and useful purpose. She makes a decision to free herself from the urge towards relationality. She will not be at the beck and call of a husband and family; "gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she like to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that;" (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.56). For Lily, as for Rachel perhaps in *A Voyage Out*, marriage is "degradation" and "dilution." (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.111.)

Lily's struggle with her painting is also significant to us here because her problem is largely to do with trying to represent a person (Mrs Ramsay) within a single frame. She, too, is preoccupied with unity, the visual metaphors of colour and shape, and her problem is made even more interesting when she tries to complete her representation of Mrs Ramsay after the latter's death and some ten years later. Lily, then, is dependant upon her imaginative powers to recall the image from her internalised memory rather than any representational skills which would try to find a means of mirroring an external scene. This kind of mimetic art is particularly difficult for Lily:

She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in her hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child.  
*Lighthouse*: 1992, p 23.

These demons not only echo her own feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence, her sense of duty towards her father, but also the words of those like Mr Tansley, who whispers in her



ear "' Women can't paint, women can't write..." (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.54). It is this which makes it impossible for her to translate what she sees onto canvas. When she returns to the painting, in the final part of the novel, Lily is again assailed by these voices which question the utilitarian value of art and the demons which disallow the worship of art and form:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. Why then did she do it? She looked at the canvas, lightly scored with running lines. It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa. What was the good of doing it then, and she heard some voice saying she couldn't paint, saying she couldn't create, as if she were caught up in one of those habitual currents which after a certain time experience forms in the mind, so that one repeats words without being aware any longer who originally spoke them.

*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.173.

As with Mrs Ramsay an internalisation of patriarchal language puts a frame around her own flights of fancy.

## **Language and feminism**

Lily tries to discern the spirit within Mrs Ramsay which makes her different from everyone else; "the essential thing" which makes her herself (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.55). She is also disappointed by the realisation that no matter how one admires and loves, no matter how much one recognises that beneath the surface there are hidden "treasures" and truths (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.57), there cannot be complete knowledge, unity and mergence with another person because, like ancient tombs, people are sealed (*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp. 57 & 58). Mrs Ramsay's shape, to Lily, is that of a dome, and, as Hermione Lee points out in the introduction to this novel this shape; "which combines the solid and the ethereal," was central to Woolf's conception of her plan for the shape of the novel (Lee in *Lighthouse*: 1992, p.xii.). When Lily paints Mrs Ramsay and James sitting together on the step in front of the house, she represents the union of mother and son by a single "triangular purple shape." Lily discusses and defends her representation with Mr Banks who raises the question of whether these "objects of universal veneration" (Mother and child) ... might be reduced to a (purple) shadow

without irreverence." But, despite Lily's pleasure in the intimacy of such a discussion, Banks' examination and his discourse is scientific ("The question being one of the relations of masses, of light and shadows" p.59), and when Lily begins to consider this approach and how to explain her own vision she is afraid that she may lose "the unity of the whole" (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.60).

It is when Lily experiences a similar loss of personality to that of Mrs Ramsay's, when she feels herself withdrawing from human community and merging with the whole, she is able to take up her painting again:

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it - a third time. And so pausing and so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? Here she was again, she thought, stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people into the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers - this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention [...] It was an exacting form of intercourse anyhow. Other worshipful objects were content with worship; men, women, God, all let one kneel prostrate; but this form, were it only the shape of a white lamp-shade looming on a wicker table, roused one to perpetual combat, challenged one to a fight in which one was bound to be worsted.

*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp 172-173.

Despite the echo of Mrs Ramsay's third stroke scene, this use of combative language, where Lily feels she is called into an upstanding and active struggle rather than a passive and prostrated transcendence, is interesting when we consider that it is Lily's feminist position which must be worked out for the completion of her artistic project. There is, then, not only a loss of personality, a kind of Keatsian "negative capability" required for creativity, but also a need for attack, rather than merely a defence of her position as a female artist. The covering of the white space, the empty canvas, is perhaps symbolic of a filling in of all the gaps, all the absences, left by the refusal to allow women into the artistic sphere:

Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack might be. For the mass loomed before her; it protruded; she felt it pressing on her eyeballs. Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she

began precariously dipping among the blues and ambers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues.

*Lighthouse*: 1992, pp.173-174.

Although we do not lose the sense of fluidity, (Lily's rhythm is that of the waves, rather than that of the light from the Lighthouse) which might remind us that this is a woman painting, the language here is also suggestive of ejaculation, as if an androgynous, two-sexed process is necessary. The rhythm is that of the sea, the material (the paint) is also fluid, the "semiotic" in Kristevan terms, but the tool of expression is a brush (straight, solid, unified, phallic). It could be argued then that by using both images in her expression of artistic practice Woolf is dissolving, through Lily, the opposition between traditionally masculine and feminine symbols. Mrs Ramsay's knitting is another example of this mixing of symbols, a "feminine" activity which employs a "masculine" tool. (17)

As we have seen, Woolf persuades us in *A Room of One's Own*, that it is vital that we do not think about our sex, that we do not dwell on inequalities and injustices, that a marriage between the male and the female in the brain be consummated, if women are to become artists at all (*A Room*: 1977, pp.94 & 99). Elaine Showalter (*A Literature of Their Own*) sees this notion of androgyny as an aesthetic mythification, "a utopian projection of the ideal artist," which is "inhuman" and which "represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness" (Showalter: 1977, p. 289). However, Toril Moi gives us a positive reading of Woolf's notion of androgyny in her introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) and takes issue with Showalter's claim that this notion expressed in *A Room of One's Own*, was a "flight away from a 'troubled feminism'" (Moi: 1993, p.2). Moi explains that Showalter reads Woolf's multiple personae and perspectives as a weakness, that the shifting of the narrative position

and the slippage of the "I" displays an impersonality which indicates a refusal to become personally involved in feminism and feminist work. Woolf's refusal to use "realist fictional forms" and her rejection of "a unified, integrated self-identity" is, to Showalter, a refusal to confront "female gender identity" (Moi: 1993, pp.6-7). But, as Moi points out, within French feminisms (Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva), and I would argue within Woolf's feminism, "this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity" (Moi: 1993, p.8). Moi is concerned here to "rescue Virginia Woolf for feminist politics":

Showalter wants the literary text to yield the reader a certain security, a firm perspective from which to judge the world. Woolf, on the other hand, seems to practice what we might now call a 'deconstructive' form of writing, one which engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse. In her own textual practice, Woolf exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning ... Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified.

But Woolf does more than practice a non-essentialist form of writing. She also reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity.  
Moi: 1993, p.9.

I would suggest that it is Woolf's refusal to practice essentialist forms of writing which reveals her feminist stance, both in literary terms and in terms of her notions of selfhood.

Kristeva, Moi tells us, saw that the modernist writings wherein "the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning" were revolutionary. This revision of text through new modes of linguistic and formal expression "testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society from the inside" (Moi: 1993, p11). Kristeva's feminist position, Moi explains, was not Liberal wherein women demand "equal access to the symbolic order", nor was it Radical, separatist wherein the symbolic order is rejected as male and femaleness, or femininity is "extolled," Kristeva's position was to reject altogether "the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (Moi: 1993, p.12). However, Woolf's union of

masculine and feminine impulses in the brain is described in *A Room of One's Own* through sexual metaphors (*A Room*: 1977, p.99). This seems to incorporate the notion that "fusion," a dissolving of boundaries, is necessary for the fertilisation of the mind and for creative activity to take place (*A Room*: 1977, p.94).

The following passage will be of interest to us here when we consider Mrs Dalloway's and Mrs Ramsay's desire for transcendence and mergence alongside that of Lily's. We must also consider that Lily's impulse towards suicide, when the possibility of mergence with Mrs Ramsay (the mother) is lost, is replaced by her eventual artistic practice and refusal to annihilate the self:

Kristeva also argues that many women will be able to let what she calls the 'spasmodic force' of the unconscious disrupt their language because of their strong links with the pre-Oedipal mother-figure. But if these unconscious pulsations were to take over the subject entirely, the subject would fall back into pre-Oedipal or imaginary chaos and develop some form of mental illness. The subject whose language lets such forces disrupt the social order, in other words, is also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness. Seen in this context, Woolf's own periodic attacks of mental illness can be linked both to her textual strategies and to her feminism. For the symbolic order is a patriarchal order, ruled by the Law of the Father, and any subject who tries to disrupt it, who lets unconscious forces slip through the symbolic repression, puts her or himself in a position of revolt against this regime.

Moi: 1993, pp.11-12.

Mary Jacobus' reading of the text is concerned to go beyond Freudian concepts of pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and daughter and incorporates a Kristevan reading of abjection and signification which offers us some feminist insight into Lily's line in the painting. Lily has moved beyond the desire for mergence and Jacobus' revision of Freud's concepts are interesting in terms of "the relations between sexual difference, subjectivity, and writing" :

*To the Lighthouse* inscribes the movement of abjection without which there could be no subjectivity, and no signification either. Differentiation begins here; within the representational scheme of the novel, painting figuratively occupies the position of the sign-system - language - which the text actually employs. If Lily's line at the end of the novel is the emblem of minimal but fixed difference which secures her self-inscription, the price Lily pays for finishing her picture is the casting out of the mother, the beloved Mrs Ramsay. Or Mrs Ramsay dies suddenly so that the 'third stroke' may be appropriated not only for Lily's art, but for Woolf's writing. The pre-Oedipal configuration which (re)produces the mother as the origin of all signification in Kristevan theory not only allows Woolf's novel to be read - to be read - beyond Freudian theory, but suggests how a reading of Woolf might revise and extend feminist thinking about the pre-Oedipal.

Jacobus in Bowlby: 1992, p. 118.

It is well documented that Woolf's writing of this book was an exercise in the exorcism of her own grief and a laying to rest of her dead parents in order to get on with her life as a writer. (18) Perhaps the line in the centre of Lily's painting is representative of the impossibility of framing in one shape a person who is called to assume different forms according to their relationships, that despite the inadequacy of these relationships the self cannot sustain a single shape and colour, for, even alone, it will attach itself quickly to the inanimate and define itself by those external objects, mimic their shapes and colours, adopt their rhythms. The painting cannot be a mirror in which the shape of Mrs Ramsay, or "her companion, a shadow" can be reflected, or framed, even though Lily can see her clearly in her imagination and the sight has the power to console her in her grief, the vision quickly vanishes (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.197).

However, it is through her remembrances of Mrs Ramsay and contemplation of the loss suffered by her death that Lily is brought back to the idea of relatedness: "It is the memory of the *everyday* relationship which restores her and eases the pain of loss and not the sublime transcendence and impersonality of symbolist form" (Waugh: 1989, p.100). For it was Mrs Ramsay who seemed to offer some answer to the unanswerable question of the meaning of life, who by bringing people together and celebrating the permanency of moments seemed to inject shape, and stability into the chaos of existence (*Lighthouse*, pp.175-176). Lily realises that her refusal to connect with and offer sympathy to others makes painting difficult, that even "in the extreme obscurity of human relationships," even in silence and non-communication, even though there is no knowledge of the other, there is intimacy and rest. (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.185 & 187). She begins to feel that if two together, for example herself and Mr. Carmichael, were to act and speak then something might be achieved, answers about life might come. Mr Carmichael and Lily have been thinking about the same thing, even though they have not spoken of it; the arrival of Mr Ramsay and his children at the Lighthouse. The effort Lily has invested in this is her gift of human sympathy, the acceptance

of Mrs Ramsay's absence and the feeling of communion with the living is what finally allows her to have her vision and complete her painting. The text ends with an echo of the realisation of his arrival "'It is finished'", and the painting is finished with a single stroke:

She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas: it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.  
*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.225.

Nicole Ward Jouve notes that:

The inclusion of Lily the artist within the merciful and organic whole that radiates from Mrs Ramsay, however intermittent and ephemeral her beams, enables Lily, in the end, also to have her 'vision'. To trace the line that will harmonize the painting, focus it, straight as the tower of a lighthouse. Unless the gesture, of course, also signifies her enduring separation from Mrs Ramsay, the womanhood that can never be complete, splits the mother from the artist, inexorably. But then their short-lived co-existence, the mothering of the one by the other, are also what the vision is made of.  
(Jouve: 1991, p.197)

The line in the centre may break up the wholeness of mother and child but it seems now that Lily's attempt to capture "the thing itself" (p.209) is less to do with a representation of Mrs Ramsay, and more to do with Lily's acceptance of those survivors, and hence her reintegration both as woman and artist into humanity. It is clear that Lily's completion is a positive step away from "the waters of annihilation" wherein her grief leads her (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p. 196).

Returning to the transcendental experience in the 'third stroke' passage it is possible to see Woolf's opposition of what appears to be "a wish for death" in Mrs Ramsay and Lily's re-appropriation of life in her acceptance of the notion that "the full potential of human beings" is "to be both separate and related" (Waugh: 1989, pp.106-107). Woolf's work, then, is of great importance to feminists because "it articulates a critique of patriarchal institutions through its exploration of the relatedness of subjects and objects" and because "she offers a critique of the exclusive identification with relational modes of identity as they have functioned within patriarchy" (Waugh: 1992, p.204.) The central focus of *Mrs Dalloway* is death, violence, disorder: "Death was defiance. Death was an effort to communicate, people feeling the impossibility to reach the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart;

rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (*Dalloway*: 1992, p. 202).

According to Jouve Mrs Ramsay is "more powerful" than Mrs Dalloway because "her house perpetuates life, allows an artist to come into her own. Mrs Ramsay's house is still chthonian" (Jouve: 1991, p.198).

Woolf's communitarian values can be seen throughout her work; connection and alienation in human relationships are in constant flux and the movement between the two is a recurring theme which is often unresolved. However, I would argue that within *To The Lighthouse* Woolf reaches some kind of resolution, not only in terms of female artistry, but also in terms of the problem of relationality and human connectedness. Lily is initially ashamed of her inability to offer human sympathy to Mr Ramsay but, in praising his boots, she inadvertently reaches across a masculine / feminine divide and arrives at a place of communion: "They had reached, she felt, a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun for ever shone, the blessed island of good boots" (*Lighthouse*: 1992, p.168). The humour here breaks up and seems to undermine the serious and separate endeavours upon which both characters are embarked. The arrival at the lighthouse and the finished painting are synchronous events which can be interpreted as highly aestheticised symbols relating to differing sexual psychologies but the non-aesthetic symbol of the boot is what ultimately brings Lily and Mr Ramsay together (19). However banal boots may be, however absurd Mr Ramsay's opinions, these two characters appear from different street corners and climb into the same taxi (*A Room*: 1977, p.92). Perhaps Woolf's intention here is to recognise sexual difference, allow space for the female artist to come into her own and offer another imperative; if women are to achieve artistic *and* social, ordinary, everyday autonomy then part of our feminist rite of passage has to be finding a way to connect.



## Notes

- (1) "How Should One Read a Book?" (1925) in *Collected Essays* Vol. 2 (1966), ed. Leonard Woolf. London: Chatto and Windus.
- (2) See the passage in question in Part One where Brontë bemoans the woman's role in Middle-class Victorian society. As we have seen, Woolf argues that the jarring effect of Grace Poole's laugh which interrupts Jane's musings on the female condition is unnecessary. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Chapter 4.
- (3) See also *Jacob's Room* (1922). Woolf explores the difference between men and women and Jacob's recognition of this difference leads to the consequent difficulty he experiences because he realises that he does not know how to talk to a woman (*Jacob's Room*: 1992, pp. 60-61, 68-69).
- (4) See Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919). Vol. 4 *Collected Papers* (1949). Trans. Joan Rivière. London: Hogarth Press Ltd.
- (5) See Gilman's account of the effects of the rest cure in Part One.
- (6) Some of these short stories were published posthumously in *A Haunted House* (1943).
- (7) This account of the difficulties Woolf was experiencing whilst writing *Night and Day* might explain Mansfield's later criticism of the book.
- (8) See "write me your sane and sensible reflections on Vanity" (March 1931), *Letters* Vol. 4, p.297. Also "arguments against suicide" (October 1930), *Letters* Vol. 4, p.242.
- (9) See also Shoshana Felman's essay mentioned in Part One, "Women and Madness: the critical phallacy" (1975). *Diacritics*, 5, pp.2-10 and in Belsey and Moore (1989).
- (10) See Patricia Waugh *Feminine Fictions* (1989), p.99.
- (11) See Freud "On Narcissism" (1914). Volume 14 Standard Edition.
- (12) See Freud "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" (1915). Volume 14 Standard Edition.
- (13) See later horse reference from *A Voyage Out*: 1992, p.196.
- (14) For a comprehensive study of the relationship between Woolf and Mansfield, particularly in terms of their writing practices, see Angela Smith's book *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two* (1999). Smith's theories centre around an exploration of "liminality"; the shared psychological and literary thresholds which hold the work of the two women together.
- (15) See *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* Vol. 3 To J.M. Murray "I am reviewing Virginia to send tomorrow; its devilishly hard. Talk about intellectual snobbery - her book reeks of it (but I cant say so)" (p.91). Also Murray and Mansfield decided that they would

not include Woolf on their list of friends (p.90).

- (16) Elaine Showalter claims that through her characterisation of Septimus, Woolf is able to explore fanaticism "both in its mad form of hallucination and delusions of grandeur, and in its socially approved manifestations as Proportion and Conversion" (Showalter in *Dalloway*: 1992, p. xv). See also Woolf's indictment of Christianity in missionary form on pages 109-110 where she employs violent imagery and berates Conversion's need for sacrifice and submission; a surrender of the human will similar to that demanded by Sir William.
- (17) Su Reid explores Mrs Ransay's knitting as a "semiotic activity" in *To the Lighthouse: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (1991), p.89.
- (18) See *A Writer's Diary*, 28 November, 1928: "I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing the Lighthouse laid them in my mind (p.175). Also in "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf explains that she was "obsessed" with "the presence" of her mother until her forties when she wrote *To the Lighthouse*. The book, she explains, was written very quickly and "when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" (*Moments*: 1976, pp. 80-81).
- (19) See Patricia Waugh on Woolf's aesthetic practice in *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (1992), pp. 107.

## Sylvia Plath: A Woman Telling Stories

It seems natural to follow Virginia Woolf with Sylvia Plath, for Plath too was concerned to find a precise articulation of the immanent and transcendent self, the body, constructions of femininity, the splitting of female consciousness, artistry and death. Also, within an investigation of the narratives which have come out of, or run parallel to, autobiography, it seems that the work of Sylvia Plath is another good starting point for a discussion about the fictionalisation of life experience. Sylvia Plath's life, as well as her work, has come to be of great significance and interest to critics, biographers and the ordinary reader. Although her censorship has both frustrated and fascinated the public, Plath's mystification and mythification is largely due to the fact that her private life has become, at least in part, public property. Because her work is thought to be largely confessional and because she has been written and rewritten so many times by others, Plath represents a consumable self, a commodity, through the reproduction of her life stories and re-creations in the fictions or "true" stories which are about her.

In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) Jacqueline Rose argues that, because Plath offers multiple and different representations of herself, it is futile and unnecessary to try to create a unified image of her as writer and woman. There is no one true voice, neither is there any possibility of uncovering one true narrative version. We could argue, therefore, that Plath herself, consciously or not, chose to defy any such totalisation:

As Plath writes herself across her journals, letters, novel, short stories and poetry. her different voices enter into an only ever partial dialogue with each other which it is impossible to bring to a close. To which of these voices are we going to assign an absolute authority - The voice of *The Bell Jar*, which she publishes under a pseudonym; the voice of the *Letters Home*, in which she communicated another but incompatible truth; the voice of the *Journals* which seems so cruelly at moments, to give to those letters the lie; the voice of her poems, which can be read as the upflight of a transcendent femininity [...] Above all these differences of writing and interpretation should act as a crucial caution against one conception of censorship - the idea that behind it can be discovered the single, unadulterated truth. Plath may be censored but, as we have seen, she also censors, transforms and endlessly rewrites herself.

Rose: 1991, p 104.

Once we immerse ourselves in the self-representation which appears in the multiple written forms of the journals, letters, short stories, poems and the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) the question "Who was Plath?" soon becomes irrelevant, due to the very impossibility of finding a satisfactory answer. This is a welcome move away from criticism which has brought Plath's life into readings of her text, pathologizing both her style and form. Rose, instead, chooses to accept the inconsistency of Plath whilst contesting that a particular postmodern feminist reading of Plath's "disordered, fragmented, shifting subjectivity" which suggests a political response to patriarchal notions of unity and linearity does not quite suit her work. Despite the movement across boundaries ("psychic, political, cultural") Plath's precision means that "the contours of the opposing elements never completely lose their shape" (Rose: 1991, p.10). Rose offers an alternative way of reading Plath's texts, a mode of reading which allows us to explore the surface, the body of work rather than dig around for buried truths about their author:

Plath is neither one identity, nor multiple identities simply dispersing themselves. She writes at the point of tension - pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture - without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two.  
Rose: 1991, p.10.

Other representations of Plath have not allowed us this freedom. In Ted Hughes' introduction to Plath's *Journals* (1982) he insists that the real Plath is only to be found in her poetry, in the "high art" of her writing, and in particular the poetry she wrote in the last months of her life, now published in *Ariel* (1965):

Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings. Some were camouflage cliché facades, defensive mechanisms, involuntary. And some were deliberate poses, attempts to find the keys to one style or another. These were the faces of her lesser selves, her false or provisional selves, the minor roles of her inner drama.  
... her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke.

A real self, as we know, is a rare thing. The direct speech of a real self is rarer still. Where a real self exists it reveals itself, as a rule, only in the quality of the person's presence, or in actions. Most of us are never more than bundles of contradictory and complementary selves. Our real self, if our belief that we have one is true, is usually dumb, shut away beneath the to-and-fro conflicting voices of the

false and petty selves. As if dumbness were the universal characteristic of the real self. When a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event - as *Ariel* was.  
Hughes in *Journals*: 1982, ppxiv - xv.

Because of the controversies surrounding Plath, expressed in the many readings of her work and life, this has not been an easy subject to address and I found that objectivity in this case was a strangely elusive stance whilst a wholly subjective approach seemed problematic because any resulting empathy might colour my readings. I was at once reluctant to project pathological readings onto the texts and simultaneously negotiating criticisms which seemed to be frequently drawing me into an unsatisfactory vortex of anger and an urge to defend Plath. It seems that only when one is able to surrender to the text does a more comfortable inroad present itself, for within the text the person of Plath is no longer problematic. That journey is an exploration of artistic practice and language.

I shall begin with my own difficulties and consequent approach. I first came to Plath as an undergraduate in 1991 on a course entitled "Literature and Gender" wherein *Ariel*, Plath's final collection of poetry, was a set text. We read this alongside Anne Stevenson's collection of poems *The Other House* (1990), which was written at the same time as Stevenson was researching and writing her biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame* (1989), and within which there is a long poem "Letter to Sylvia Plath" written in 1988. In this poem the speaker seems to want to clarify her position regarding Plath and her work echoing the poet's constant urge to "Catch it! Catch it! Catch it! Catch it!" Stevenson offers many representations of the writer and her life which seem to want to undermine the person and consequently colour readings of Plath's texts. In Stevenson's work the biographical details of Plath's life as she perceives them inextricably attach themselves to the body of her writing. The letter begins in the third stanza of the poem:

Dear Sylvia, we must close our book.  
Three springs you've perched like a black rook  
between sweet weather and my mind.  
At last I have to seem unkind

and exorcise my awkward awe.  
My shoulder doesn't like your claw.  
Stevenson: 1990, p.18

The speaker then forgives and praises "the fiercest poet of our time" before going on to give her interpretation of Plath's rise to fame which oddly juxtaposes an appropriation of some of Plath's themes with a negative image of the writer as a woman who "bought with death a mammoth name / to set in the cold museum of fame."

A dissolute nun, you had to serve  
the demon muse who peeled your nerve  
and fuelled your energy with hate.  
Malevolent will-power made you great,  
...

Sylvia, I see you in this view  
of glassy absolutes where you,  
a frantic Alice, trip on snares,  
crumple and drown in your own tears.  
Stevenson: 1990, p.19.

This "selfish and sad" Alice could not find "gratitude and love ... / in reputation's building ground." The speaker continues this disenfranchisement of Plath which seems to find its root in some kind of ethical, overarching disdain regarding Plath's suicide. The tone is bitter both in terms of the posthumous fame which has come out of what is portrayed as a cowardly act and in terms of the burden of consciousness suffered by those still living:

The future is where the dead go  
in rage, bewilderment and pain  
to make and magnify their name.

Meanwhile, the continuous present casts  
longer reflections on the past.  
Nothing has changed much. Famine, war  
fatten your spider as before.  
...

Poor Sylvia, could you not have been  
a little smaller than a queen -  
a river, not a tidal wave  
engulfing all you tried to save?

Rather than not be justified  
you sickened in loneliness and died,  
while we live on in messy lives,  
rueful or tired or barely wise.  
Stevenson: 1990, pp. 20-21.

I met Anne Stevenson in the summer of 1992 at Lumb Bank, a writer's retreat which once was the Hughes' family home, in Heptonstall, a small village in West Yorkshire in whose graveyard Plath is buried. Stevenson had come to read from her latest poetry and I was interested to meet her and ask her about Plath. I had not yet read *Bitter Fame*. Stevenson told me that she and Plath had been contemporaries with similar Anglo-American backgrounds and education. The impression of Plath she communicated was that she was a brilliant, but vain and silly girl. I was quite surprised to find that she had not in fact met Plath when I later read the preface to Stevenson's controversial biography but found that the attitude and sentiment expressed in that conversation was quite clearly here again in written form. New to feminism, I was also interested to speak to a more experienced woman about her attitudes towards gender and writing and thus embarrassed myself by asking, during a more formal question time after Stevenson's reading, what she thought about her texts being taught and read on a course such as "Literature and Gender." Stevenson was immediately championed by the two male tutors who openly scoffed at my question saying that it was ridiculous and inappropriate; we were supposed to be talking about writing processes, not politics. Stevenson did not comment. Naturally, I do not wish to fall into the category of those women described in Stevenson's preface to *Bitter Fame* whose responses and readings after Plath's death were due to "a shocking revelation of extremist elements in their own psyches." Nor can I identify with those "for whom the legacy of Sylvia Plath was no more than a simplified feminist ideology" (Stevenson: 1989, p.304). As we know only too well this radical simplification led some of these women to a seemingly relentless defamation of Hughes and the removal of his name from Plath's gravestone. However, I cannot pretend that my consequent, reluctant and mistrustful reading of *Bitter Fame* was not influenced by the encounter described above.

A more positive influence on my reading of Plath, has been Jacqueline Rose's book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Although there is biographical detail within this volume, the

emphasis is on a reading of Plath's text rather than a distasteful exhumation of her grave. Stevenson presents a negative, "corrected" version of the woman who has supposedly been wrongly mythologised and hence has achieved a posthumous "meteoric rise to fame" (Stevenson: 1989, p. xi). Rose, on the other hand, is concerned to read not untruths and contradictions, nor psychopathic influences, across the many forms and genres of Plath's writings in an attempt to uncover some true version of the person, but to note and analyze the differences within the language:

It is that provisional, precarious nature of self-representation which appears so strikingly from the multiple forms in which Plath writes. What she presents us with, therefore is not only the difference of writing from the person who produces it, but also the division internal to language, the difference of writing from itself. It is then all the more striking that so many critics have felt it incumbent upon themselves to produce a unified version of Plath as writer and as woman, as if that particular form of fragmentation or indirect representation were something which, through the completion of their own analysis of her, they could somehow repair. Their frequent diagnoses of Plath seem to me to have as at least one of their effects, if not purposes, that they have transposed into a fact of her individual pathology the no less difficult problem of the contradictory, divided and incomplete nature of representation itself.  
Rose, 1991, p. 5.

We have read too often the assumption that a *sick logic* informs Plath's writing (1) or statements like Stevenson's in her analysis of the *Ariel* poems which suggest that all Plath had to offer was an inroad into her own psyche:

Although she never quite abandoned her self-preoccupation, toward the end the "self", so prominent as source of Sylvia's unique rage, all but disappears, as if, with the exorcisms of "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," she was able to attain another plane in her mythology. [...]  
With superb artistry these poems record a dangerously altered and alienated state of mind.  
Stevenson: 1989, pp. 287-288.

Edward Butscher opens his critical biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976) with the following admission :

To write about an artist's life is to write about his or her art. That is the inescapable truth a critical biographer must constantly confront if he hopes to make sense out of the mass of material, fact and fiction, preserved in the artist's name. When the artist in question is primarily a poet, the relationship between life and art, history and myth, becomes even more intense and less patient of disengagement. When the poet is Sylvia Plath, a "confessional" poet who was consciously dedicated to fusing biography with poetry to create an enduring legend, this relationship can no longer be either split asunder or seriously challenged. And yet, the task remains to trace to their various sources the complex system of roots that led, almost inexorably, to both the later poetry and the suicide of the poet at the age of thirty.  
Butscher: 1976, p.xi.



Once again we find that it is a fascination with the death of Plath which drives the readings of her texts and a desire to uncover reasons for that death in fact cover and colour those readings with an impulse to constantly pathologise her writing.

· It is almost impossible to separate Plath's voice, Plath's representations of a self, from those who speak about her life or speak for her, about her work, in editorial comment. She is both cultural icon and cultural commodity, but, above all, I would agree with Rose that "Plath is a fantasy" (Rose: 1991, p.5). We can surely gain nothing by reducing her to this or that personality and anyway this seems an impossible task if we believe the conflicting reports of Plath's multiple selves from those who knew her in life. We would probably be better equipped to concern ourselves with the literary legacy, the insights Plath can offer in terms of representation within the labyrinthal body of her text. Dido Merwin contests that Plath lies in her letters, suggesting that there should be no fiction therein. Hughes claimed that the *Journals* and the final collection of poems are the only *true* representations of the *real* Plath. But as we attempt to get close to this "reality," reading across her genre and form, listening to all the voices, we realise more and more that we are still only gaining a glimpse, an elusive shadow that rightly refuses to be brought into the spotlight. The body of text, like the physical body of Plath, is still a surface expression, the masquerade of a life.

Rather than try to read a life into that text, or imagine a life on the other side of its language, surely more can be gained if we allow ourselves to remain within the, perhaps more legitimately accessible, linguistic production of Plath's prose and poetry. This is not easy, as we are constantly pulled this way and that by those voices which insist on Plath's confessional bent and point up some psychic or biographical reality behind the fantasy in Plath's writing. Indeed, within the published journals we will see that Plath was often working on her style and form in order to produce texts out of her own experience. There is ample evidence that she used her life as source material but the concern is always to find a language which could offer

an adequate or appropriate representation of that material. Rather than an exploration of the conflicting reports of the person (including Plath's) in order to locate a version which most suits our own subjective response to Plath, perhaps it is an investigation of the language, the dialogues within and across these texts, with all their contradictions and fissures, that will offer an understanding of Plath's importance as, above all, a woman telling stories.

## **The Art of Saying "I"**

Reading Plath raises many interesting questions about writing the self in a period when critics are trying to balance Barthes' notion of "The Death of the Author," which demands that we allow the text to live independently, with research which is moving more and more towards a celebration of women's autobiographical texts; here the finding of a voice, the recovery of authorship for women, is a central concern. The boundaries between life and art have been particularly blurred by critics, biographers and Plath herself. Linda Anderson points out in her book *Women and Autobiography in the 20th Century* (1997) that: "Plath's life has provided the most common or advertised route into her work." *The Bell Jar* supposedly offers "the thinnest of fictional disguises," whilst *The Journals* are promoted because they unveil "Plath's most intimate and private self" (Anderson:1997, p.101). As Anna Tripp suggests in her essay, "Saying 'I': Sylvia Plath as Tragic Author or Feminist Text" (1994), an author-centred reading of Plath's poetry would place her historically as preceding second-wave feminism therefore critics such as Anne Stevenson, author of *Bitter Fame* could argue that feminist readings are inappropriate. I would agree with Tripp that a critique which is derived from the surface of the text, rather than one which reaches through to a life, can offer us some useful insights into Plath's projects (both poetry and prose works) which may not have been informed by sexual politics but were often, I will argue, inspired by her rejection of ideologies surrounding gender. (2)

In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* Rose also suggests another area of interest which I will address in more depth later; that is Plath's hybridic nature in relation to cultural production (Rose: 1991, p.167). Plath was concerned not only with the "high" art of poetry but also with works which would have a mass appeal, short stories for women's magazines. Plath's eclectic interest in and production of "low" formulaic prose has earned her criticism from many quarters. Lucas Myers explains in his appendix to Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* that during an early meeting with Plath he could not disguise his disapproval of Plath's involvement with magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *Seventeen*. What is perhaps more interesting is his description of Plath's non-reaction to this: "What surprised me most about Sylvia was that she didn't seem to notice my disapproval. She chatted on, with energy" (Stevenson: 1989, p.313). Plath's interest in popular fiction has also earned disapproval from her feminist supporters, who view such publications as Plath was keen to appear in as degrading to women because they promote and uphold idealised notions of feminine domesticity. Consequently, this area of Plath's work has largely been ignored by feminist critics but I hope to show through detailed analysis that it is perhaps within this writing that we can see most clearly Plath's rejection of patriarchy's order for gender roles within marriage and, in particular, her rejection of culturally produced models of femininity.

The centre of my interest lies within Plath's writing practices. I will re-iterate here, it is not Plath's personal experience which I wish to analyse but the means by which she appropriates language to express those experiences. Let us first focus particularly on the difference within the language used to express the same, or similar events in her history. The following selected excerpts illustrate this difference:

*December 28, 1953:*

So I hit upon what I figured would be the easy way out; I waited until my mother had gone to town, my brother was at work, and my grandparents were out in the back yard. Then I broke the lock of my mother's safe, took out the bottle of 50 sleeping pills, and descended to the dark sheltered ledge in our basement, after having left a note to mother that I had gone on a long walk and would not be

back for a day or so. I swallowed quantities and blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion. My mother believed my note, sent out searching parties, notified the police, and, finally, on the second day or so, began to give up hope when she found that the pills were missing. In the meantime, I had stupidly taken too many pills, vomited them, and came to consciousness in a dark hell, banging my head repeatedly on the ragged rocks of the cellar in futile attempts to sit up and, instinctively, call for help.

*Letters Home*: 1976, p.131.

*February 19, 1956:*

A morbid fear: that protests too much. To the doctor. I am going to the psychiatrist this week, just to meet him, to know he's there. And ironically, I feel I need him. I need a father. I need a mother. I need some older, wiser being to cry to. I talk to God, but the sky is empty, and Orion walks by and doesn't speak. I feel like Lazarus: that story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination?) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, windblown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. I identify too closely with my reading, my writing.

*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*: 2000, p.199.

It was completely dark.

I felt the darkness, but nothing else, and my head rose, feeling it, like the head of a worm. Someone was moaning. Then a great, hard weight smashed against my cheek like a stone wall and the moaning stopped.

The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths to its old surface calm after a dropped stone.

A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance. Then the voices stopped...

Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried,

'Mother!'

*The Bell Jar*: 1966, pp. 180-181.

... The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
"Lady Lazarus," *Ariel*: 1968, p.17.

Here we have the dispassionate communication of her suicide attempt in letter form, the raw, emotional outpourings and internal dialogue of the diary, the balanced formalisation of her prose and the highly crafted drama of her poetry. Although the content of the story is recognisable in each different form, the narrative voice undergoes a marked alteration to such

an extent that the telling of the story, the manner in which it is told, is perhaps of more interest than the events described.

However, a closer analysis of structure, diction and tone may also suggest that within these different genre-frameworks there is a re-appearance of a recognisable poetic voice. In my readings this has become something of a magic thread uncovering the recurrence of a dialectical exploration into the relationship between immanence and transcendence, a realisation of the self as material body but also as a being who can transcend that reality and explore the imagination through the production of fantasy. We have already seen this preoccupation within Woolf's themes and writing practices.

A Kristevan reading of Plath's text is perhaps appropriate here; we can surmise that a return to the body and the imagination is signalled in the above passages by a return to poetic language, Kristeva's semiotic. Central to the first passage, for example, we have a marked change in tone when the speaker employs alliteration and imagery to describe a regressive return to mergence with the mother as well as the experience of unleashing the death-drive: "I swallowed quantities and blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion". The 's' and 'b' sounds are onomatopoeic and note the centrality of the "whirling blackness" which describes the experience of both internal and external chaos as boundaries dissolve due to the act of swallowing. The positioning suggests perhaps that this theme is the very source and pivot of the prose paragraph. Note also that in the third passage alliteration, imagery and the word "black" are used in a sentence which stands between the "someone" and the "I" of the narrative: "The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths its old surface calm after a dropped stone." The void and tension between the silence and the voices, the darkness and the light, self and other, is only to be dissipated when the re-birthing has been completed in a later mirrored, or symmetrical, sentence and this re-entry is signalled by the isolated exclamation "'Mother!'" However, the sentence; "Then the

chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried," is markedly different in tone, despite the similarities as regards its use of alliteration, imagery and form, due to the use the recurring hard "c" sounds rather than the softer "b" and "s" in the previous sentence. Rather than dissolution, here the sounds suggest a kind of crystallisation of form. This is not a slipping into oblivion, a recourse to the imaginary, but a jolting back to the symbolic and language.

As the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" asserts *everything is art* and so, perhaps from these readings, we can deduce that the theatre of the self, is to be played out on the one hand within language; note the suggestion of a deliberate dissolution, regression and a return to the dark enclosure of the semiotic: "I rocked shut/ As a seashell", and on the other hand a finely crafted and formalised language which demands active control. Even when we find a common theme or a recognisable style, tone, voice, the discovery is accompanied by the realisation that all is multiplicity, all defies the impulse to establish a unified definition or interpretation. "Lady Lazarus" can give us ample material for a discussion about the fragmentation and artifice of the subject. Here Plath incorporates both the confessions of autobiographical story, the immanence of the flesh, the desire for deconstruction and annihilation, whilst writing the desire for a transcendence of the self in order to re-construct a fictional, mythical, being: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that in "Lady Lazarus" Plath:

reverses common notions of life and death, suggesting that her three suicide attempts and her repeated return from the realm of the dead should be seen as an expression of autonomous authorship. In that she herself legislates the boundary between life and death, she comes into a power of her own. [...] Only in relation to the doctor, who seeks to reconstitute her, does she take on the function of a reified body, which serves not her own but someone else's act of creation: 'I am your opus, / I am your valuable.' Yet the power inherent in the art of dying encompasses self-revival as well. Not the doctor but rather she herself possesses the body in which she returns.  
Bronfen: 1992, p.401.

There is, within the theme of Plath's texts, a constant questioning of subjectivity, autonomy and authorship. How do we go about telling stories about ourselves? What happens to that

self in the process and production of writing? We have seen already in the Journal entry selected (February 19, 1956) Plath's complaint that she was identifying too closely with her writing. Thus we are confronted with the question: do we write about ourselves or do we become that self which we have written? According to her Journal entry of February 25, 1956, Plath tried to justify her life and create order through writing:

The dialogue between my Writing and my Life is always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalising: in other words; I justified the mess I made of life by saying I'd give it order, form, beauty, writing about it; I justified my writing by saying it would be published, give me life (and prestige to life).  
*Journals: 2000, pp. 208-209.*

Plath finishes this entry with the expression of her desire "to build all solid." She, at least here, seems to be consciously seeking some kind of unification and cohesion through her writing of the self. But this desire is linked to form, style and publication, control in the symbolic and acceptance/recognition in the public world. For Plath, the danger is a lack of solidity, and the threat of the fluid nature, the "slithering shifting," is screened by her language as she moves the weight of responsibility from life experience to written articulation where the burden of consciousness is borne by the text.

Once a life experience has been told as a story, verbalised or written down, it is objectified and as such the self can be partially unified through form. As Foucault points out in "What is Enlightenment?" this concept of the self as an aesthetic artefact is hardly new and certainly not limited to literary experience. Baudelaire's Nineteenth Century objectification of the self was inextricably bound up with the notion of artistic invention rather than self-discovery.

Baudelaire's "dandy", Foucault explains, "makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art." The modern man "tries to invent himself" (Foucault in Rabinow (ed): 1984, pp. 41-42). We are not, therefore, free to wander within, and explore, a pre-existent but unknown self, however, we are encouraged to consider and undertake the task of self-production. Reading Plath one has to address this consideration

alongside the notion of an obvious dispersal of the self as it is represented by multiple generic productions.

Also of interest to us is the presence of an alterego; another recurrent theme in Plath's writing. This splitting of the self, the production of an other, is particularly interesting when we consider notions of narcissism and schizophrenia and these areas are perhaps ripe for exploration here in the following photograph and mirror passages:

*January 10, 1953:*

Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it. It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel, it is what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again. The pouting disconsolate mouth, the flat, bored, numb, expressionless eyes: symptoms of the foul decay within.

*Journals: 2000, p. 155.*

The nurse sighed and opened the top bureau drawer. She took out a large mirror in a wooden frame that matched the wood of the bureau and handed it to me.

At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture.

You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner.

The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours. I smiled.

The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.

A minute after the crash another nurse ran in. She took one look at the broken mirror, and at me, standing over the blind, white pieces, and hustled the young nurse out of the room.

*The Bell Jar: 1966, pp.184-185.*

This alienation from, distrust and hatred of the other, represented through the reflected or photographic image, is re-iterated throughout Plath's writing. Despite the use of the impersonal pronoun "it" in the first passage, the image is recognised as a representation of Plath's inner self. In the passage taken from *The Bell Jar*, however, Esther's knowledge that the image is of herself is not apparent. Even though the dropping of the mirror might indicate the shock of recognition, it could also be read as a reaction to the encounter with the other which she had perceived at first to be a static, not a moving, picture. In fact, Esther's rational responses to the nurses shows a marked contrast to self-loathing which we read in the Journal entry: "I listened with mild interest. Anyone could drop a mirror. I didn't see why they should



get so stirred up" (*Bell Jar*: 1966, p.185).

In Plath's poem "Mirror" (1961) it is the glass which is the speaker: "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. / Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike. / I am not cruel, only truthful -." Like the mirror in Woolf's short story "Lady in the Looking Glass" it reflects the stillness of the objects opposite and waits, menacingly, for the faces which will interfere with its meditation-like contemplation of the opposite wall. The indifference expressed here in the opening lines is contrasted later in the poem by the reaction of the woman who is reflected, now in a lake: "She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands. / I am important to her." This dispassionate "I" is assured of its power. The tone of Plath's poem throughout suggests a divorcing of selves and their reflections because the mirror, the keeper of reflected images, has a subjectivity of its own. (3)

We could read Plath's recourse to the semiotic as an attempt to articulate exclusion from the symbolic through circumnavigation via the imaginary, as well as an attempt to address the loss of boundaries, and consequent anguish, which follows the experience of herself as other. It is noteworthy that in Plath's autobiographical piece "Ocean 1212-W" (1962) separation from her mother and a sense of abandonment is juxtaposed with a sense of being separate from the surroundings of which she had once felt part. At the beginning of the piece she recounts an early memory of crawling into the sea and being rescued by her mother. Her earliest encounter with the sea is at first related to primary mergence with the mother: "Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.117). This breath is different from the other sounds she remembers, no other sound can lull her back into her earliest memories: "The motherly pulse of the sea made a mock of such counterfeits" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.117). The narration of her first entrance into the sea is a one of instant attraction and dangerous, if fantastical, mergence:

Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill. When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels.

I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass. Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood? For a time I believed not in God nor Santa Claus, but in mermaids. They seemed as logical and possible to me as the brittle twig of a seahorse in the Zoo aquarium or the skates lugged up on the lines of cursing Sunday fisherman - skates the shape of old pillowslips with the full, coy lips of women.

*Johnny Panic and other prose writings*: 1979, p.118.

Rather than self-annihilation, again we have the sense of transcendence, shape-shifting as well as the imagery which links women with the sea and creatures from within the ocean.

When Plath learns that the reason for her mother's disappearance is the birth of her baby brother, her relationship with the sea-scape changes: "As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the *separateness* of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.120). She now considers herself a "reject" thrown out by the tide:

I picked up, frigidly, a stiff pink starfish. It lay at the heart of my palm, a joke dummy of my own hand. Sometimes I nursed starfish alive in jam jars of seawater and watched them grow back lost arms. On this day, this awful birthday of otherness, my rival, somebody else, I flung the starfish against a stone. Let it perish. It had no wit.

*Johnny Panic and other prose writings*: 1979, pp.120-121.

This is a story about growing consciousness and realisation of her own otherness. She doesn't breathe with the sea. She knows she has a separate identity because she knows that others exist. As Rose points out in reference to this piece "there is no such thing as an ego on its own, since the ego exists, comes into being, only as difference from itself" (Rose: 1991, p.146).

### **"Poem for a Birthday" (1959)**

Identity, the act of swallowing and an address to a mother are recurring themes in Plath's "Poem for a Birthday". As Rose points out this has been read by some critics as a transitional poem in terms of Plath's poetic development, whilst others have suggested that it relied too heavily on Theodore Roethke (4). Kroll and Hughes describe the poem as a clear sign of

"Plath's emergent mythology of self-transcendence" (Rose: 1991, p.41). Rose also notes Hughes' judgement that the poem signals some sort of re-unification of the self: "where the self, shattered in 1952, suddenly finds itself whole" (Hughes in Rose: 1991, p. 41) (5). The poem appears in seven distinct parts and so immediately seems an expression of the fragmented nature of identity. However, repetitions of the themes I have mentioned also form some sense of coherence and unity, an impulse, perhaps a progression, towards wholeness. In the penultimate line of the poem the self emerges *mended*, the task of reconstruction is completed: "My mendings itch. There is nothing to do." The final line "I shall be as good as new" suggests, however, a period of convalescence, there is nothing left to do but wait for the wounds to heal, the scars will fade to give the illusion of newness. This is perhaps a Frankensteinian birth, a body which has been stitched together from all the disparate parts.

In the first section of the poem "Who", the "I" is reduced to a minimalistic orifice: "I am all mouth." The convalescent body in the denouement juxtaposed with this disembodied "I" at the beginning would indicate a sense of grotesque, if macabre, progression. We could also read "I am all mouth" as a self-derogatory statement: all mouth, no action, I say I am but I am not, I say I will do, but I do not, there is nothing behind my language and nothing will come out of it. Later in this section the "I" is further disembodied: "Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me." The possible relocation of the tongue suggests a lack of possession and detachment. The mouth can lose its tongue, the tongue can inhabit another mouth, can mouth another's language. The imperative "Eat me" suggests a desire for total effacement, disappearance, to be swallowed and kept hidden within another orifice. With reference to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) Bronfen explains that this poem:

unfolds a fantasy of returning to the psychic condition that existed prior to having received a social identity [...] situating this presymbolic psychic condition, in which the individual is not separated from her immediate presence and reality, in a tomb-like site. [...] It is indeed through an apostrophe of

the maternal body that this journey into the realm of unstructured, disseminated materiality can begin, into a psychic site which Julia Kristeva has called the semiotic chora subtending all processes of symbolization. Imagining herself not only shrunk in size but also inside another body - namely, as the tongue in her mother's mouth - she invokes a reversal of birthgiving. Bronfen: 1998, pp. 86-87.

In the second part of the poem "Dark House" the "I" is not sitting, not passive, but active: "Chewing", "Oozing", "Whistling, wiggling", "Thinking". Movement is possible because the "I" is eating: "These marrowy tunnels! / Moley-handed, I eat my way." By the third section the "I" has begun to reject the mother: "A red tongue is among us. / Mother, keep out of my barnyard, / I am becoming another." Now that "I" must swallow rather than be swallowed:

Feed me the berries of dark.  
The lids won't shut. Time  
Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun  
Its endless glitter.  
I must swallow it all.  
*Collected Poems*: 1981, p. 133.

Swallowing time, eating the cord, eating berries that will bring sleep, perhaps bring us again to Plath's attempted suicide and the notion of an annihilation of the self, but this section ends with another command: "Tell me my name." This name is already known by someone, it must be told and the desire for knowledge of the name indicates the desire for self-identification. However, in section six, "Witch Burning," it is clear that the speaker has not managed to lay claim to an embodied self: "I inhabit / The wax image of myself, a doll's body. / Sickness begins here."

Towards the end of the poem we enter familiar territory as regards imagery. The setting of the cellar where Plath first attempted suicide, the madhouse, allusions to electric shock treatment, all these pull us into *The Bell Jar*, the journals, and the short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." The voice in this section connects with the beginning of the poem where the "I" was sitting small in a flowerpot, but the tone here is fearful:

If I am a little one, I can do no harm.  
If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over. So I said,  
Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.  
They are turning the burners up, ring after ring.

We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow.  
It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth.  
*Collected Poems*: 1981, p. 135.

The tone of the imperative "Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand" is also notably different. The pleading "only" indicates the voice of one subdued, one who promises to be good: "Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days / I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone."

To be devoured was not good: "I entered / The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard." Love and language are outside where "The food tubes embrace me" and "The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry / Open one stone eye." Re-integration into the symbolic world of language is not necessarily rebirth, but resurrection as we have seen in "Lady Lazarus": "This is the after-hell: I see the light." This is not the *after-birth*, the last three words "good as new" indicate repair of something old, not emergence of something new-born. Bronfen notes that many of Plath's poems "though tracing a psychic journey into the absolute negativity preceding and subtending language, focus on the process of re-emergence back into daylight" (Bronfen: 1998, p.86).

It is clear from Plath's work that she is addressing the injustice of female confinement and I would suggest that sometimes the poetic voice attempts to formulate a new language which articulates a refusal of phallogocentric separation and a necessary return to the female body, to the abandoned mother. However, there is also a sense of poetic urgency which moves away from emergence, dissolution, silence and darkness. It is the very interplay between self and other within Plath's writing which expresses the indeterminacy, lack of unity, unfixedness of female experience within a patriarchal society that prioritises determinacy, unity and stability. The fact that the "mendings itch" might suggest that, if the speaker does not wait for her "fissures" to heal, she may come apart again. The wholeness at the end of the poem is therefore fragile and dependent on passivity and obedience. One must not scratch at the joins.

However, like the ending of "Lady Lazarus" we can also read a reclamation of power. The self has been engulfed and resurrected, it has lost its shape and been reformed but the possibility of re-dissolution is in the hands of the subject, rather than under the control of the doctors.

The female human is not unified, she is multiple, she is both self and other, subject and object, and therefore her 'narcissistic' and 'schizophrenic' experiences are intrinsic to her eccentric existence rather than symptomatic of her abnormality. However, a total collapse into the Kristeva's semiotic would lead to a total annihilation of the self, a recourse to the death instinct, therefore measures must be taken to define the interface and set up a system so that we can protect the ego's boundaries (6).

### ***The Bell Jar (1963)***

The threat of annihilation through mergence with all and disintegration of the unified self causes Esther in Plath's novel to place herself within an imaginary glass bell jar. Hence she creates a transparent but non-porous outer casing to hold herself in and to protect her from outside interference. The effect of implementing this defence mechanism is not necessarily pleasant, as Esther explains, she is left with no sense of feeling and "stewing in my own sour air" (*Bell Jar*: 1966, p.196). However, the re-establishment of some kind of self-reflexive awareness, as well as the sense of confinement, is evident in the prose: "I sank back in the grey, plush seat and closed my eyes. The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir" (*Bell Jar*: 1966, p.196-197). Thus this cocooning process is described as a safety measure to guard against any further loss of personal unity. The necessity of the imaginary bell jar and the ensuing numbness is interesting when we consider Irigaray's writing on female schizophrenia.

In "Women's Exile" (1977) Luce Irigaray explains that women experience madness as corporal pain and they do not have the means to articulate either the body or the splitting of

the self. However, Plath's bell jar metaphor can be read as an attempt to seize upon some form of language which can describe, capture and elaborate through symbolic means the condition against which Esther is rebelling (female confinement) and which is the intrinsic cause of her illness. As Bronfen points out there is a reverberation between the heroine's fluid sense of identity and a need to establish some kind of autonomy in the face of patriarchal law (7):

In Sylvia Plath's autobiographic portrait of her struggles as a young woman artist, the psychic impasse of scepticism translates uncannily into the hysteric's concern with keeping the question of identity undecided, oscillating between various self-fashionings, celebrating each, but as constructions. As Jacques Lacan argues in his discussion of Freud's case study on Dora, the hysteric places herself in relation to a figure of paternal authority, sustaining his desire even as she ceaselessly questions the authority of his power. But the hysteric's position before this symbolic law is also contradictory, given that, although she accepts that the question of her existence can be articulated only in relation to symbolic interpellation, she, nevertheless, perpetually renegotiates her relation to the expectations she is asked to fulfil.

Bronfen 1998: pp.53-54.

Bronfen's analysis in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992) is useful to us here, as she notes the significance of death as *performance* both in terms of Esther's failed attempts to write, her attempt to experience death and Plath's own relationship with narratology:

Plath resorts to a chiasmic structure. At first Esther uses her body as a medium, fantasising and then realising death *in lieu* of the novel about Elaine she can't write. Yet *The Bell Jar* is implicitly the novel that Sylvia Plath, disguised as Esther Greenwood, couldn't have her fictional self write until she had experienced death. It is written out of death, in contradistinction to the external rendition of her suicide attempt in the newspaper as well as to the fantasy spectators like Joan. In this novel she offers a reading of her death-like self, not only by repeating the death and rebirth she designs for herself but also by supplementing it with the double of the self-ironic commentator. Even as she tells the story of how her body and her text turn death back into life, death remains potentially a revenant sublation.

Bronfen: 1992, pp.411-412.

It is well known that originally the novel was written under a pseudonym and Plath undermined the book's importance telling her mother to forget it and to keep its existence a secret: "Forget about the novel and tell no one of it. It's a pot-boiler and just practice" (*Letters*: 1976, p.477). Plath's transition towards "low" art at this stage in her writing career, I believe, is important from a feminist perspective. Critics such as Jacqueline Rose, Elisabeth Bronfen and Linda Anderson have explored Plath's easy movement and the cultural significance of Plath's interest in both the "high" art of her poetry and the "low" art of her

prose writings. The fact that the manuscript for *The Bell Jar* was written on the other side of the paper she was using for the *Ariel* poems is perhaps a clear indication of the symbiotic relationship between these two forms (8).

The importance of *The Bell Jar* is partly rooted in its clear political investigation and commentary on the toxic effects of the American dream as regards the female role in society. It is Esther's mother's desire that she study to be a secretary rather than waste her time on travel, journalism or writing a novel. She should marry, support her husband and have children. It is this sentencing which drives Esther to madness and suicide. This is certainly reflective of Plath's early concerns about her future writing career. In November 1952 Plath seems delighted with the acceptance of her stories in women's magazines but she questions how high she can set her goals and fears a descent into domestic obscurity. She wonders why Woolf committed suicide and whether her writing was a "sublimation" of "deep, basic desires":

The future? God - will it get worse & worse? Will I never travel, never integrate my life, never have purpose, meaning? Never have time - long stretches, to investigate ideas, philosophy - to articulate the vague seething desires in me? Will I be a secretary - a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband's ability to grow intellectually & professionally while I am impeded - will I submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse to face myself, and go either mad or become neurotic?  
*Journals*: 2000, p.151.

She decides against seeking psychiatric help: "I will not let myself get sick, go mad, or retreat like a child into blubbing on someone else's shoulder. Masks are the order of the day - and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid" (*Journals*: 2000, p.151).

In a later Journal entry (February 1957) Plath articulates again her fear of being seduced by domesticity and makes reference to lighter reading and in the same paragraph to Woolf:

I was getting worries about becoming too happily stodgily practical instead of studying Locke, for instance, or writing — I go make an apple pie, or study the Joy of Cooking, reading it like a novel. Whoa, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter. And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with



a battery of her novels Saturday with Ted. And she works off her depression over rejections from Harper's (no less! - - - and I can hardly believe that the Big Ones get rejected too!) by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock and sausage. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her.  
*Journals*: 2000, p.269.

Plath's continues her entry with references to her love of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. The fact that in these two novels Woolf presents two formidably successful housewives and hostesses, in whose hands the art of cooking, or throwing a dinner party becomes a kind of theatrical performance, does not seem to allay Plath's self-derision. She continues to bemoan the fact that she is "apple-pie happy" and at the same time is feeling "sick" because she has not been writing. She also claims that she was "reduplicating" Woolf's suicide in her own "black summer of 1953" (*Journals*: 2000, p.269).

This duplicity which we see in Plath's attitude towards domesticity is characteristic of Plath's duplicity in other areas. Plath's novel is at once a hilarious story about an ambitious girl caught in the middle of the artificiality of the New York media circle and struggling to release herself from suburban constricts of the American dream for happy family life, and a novel about psychosis, death and rebirth. Bronfen takes issue with Hughes' criticism that the structure of *The Bell Jar* does not work because it is an unbalanced tug-of-war between two types of novel (9):

While 'the bewildering fact that each level speaks in the equally-real-or-symbolic terms of the other' leads Hughes to judge the novel to be a raggedly imperfect art of a book, producing a paradox that makes it truly tragic, I would counter that it is precisely this rhetoric of ambivalent contradiction, with both the protective fiction and the traumatic message of psychic fragility simultaneously colouring each other, which makes for Plath's successful deployment of a strategy of cultural performativity. Not the tone of tragic violence or mythic pathos, as in the *Ariel* poems, impresses here, but rather the brilliant eye for the absurd humour inherent to the constrictive scenario of romantic self-absorption and the impasse of scepticism played through in her *Journals* of the same period.  
Bronfen: 1998, p115.

I would agree with Bronfen that the relationship between psychic fragility and the culture of fifties America is in fact the central theme of Plath's novel:

the disconcerting duplicity Plath performs in *The Bell Jar* aims at disclosing how the knowledge of psychic alienation and death urge in fact functions as the shared secret upon which the smooth artificiality, the cool glamour, and the apple-pie happy domesticity proclaimed by 1950s commercial culture came to rest. Bronfen: 1998, p.115.

Let us consider the following passage from *The Bell Jar* where Esther performs a sacrificial ritual, offering her clothing to the city of New York. This passage follows an account of attempted rape from which Esther has only narrowly escaped.

At that vague hour between dark and dawn, the sunroof of the Amazon was deserted. Quiet as a burglar in my cornflower-sprigged bathrobe, I crept to the edge of the parapet. The parapet reached almost to my shoulders, so I dragged a folding chair from the stack against the wall, opened it, and climbed on to the precarious seat. A stiff breeze lifted the hair from my head. At my feet, the city doused its lights in sleep, its buildings blackened, as if for a funeral. It was my last night. I grasped the bundle I carried and pulled at a pale tail. A strapless elasticized slip which, in the course of wear, had lost its elasticity, slumped into my hand. I waved it, like a flag of truce, once, twice ... The breeze caught it, and I let go. A white flake floated out into the night, and began its slow descent. I wondered on what street or rooftop it would come to rest. I tugged at the bundle again. The wind made an effort, but failed, and a batlike shadow sank towards the roof garden of the penthouse opposite. Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York.  
*Bell Jar*: 1966, pp.116-117.

The reader is clearly meant to assume that Esther intends to sacrifice herself following her violent ordeal with Marco, her assailant. However, it is not herself that she intends to give up but the symbols of femininity which have lead her into danger. The fact that she waves the garments as if they were flags of truce suggests that Esther holds herself partly responsible, for she has been in collusion with the expected trappings of womanhood. As we have seen with Woolf, clothing and female confinement are inextricably linked. Casting off her wardrobe from the roof of a New York tower block (a symbol of masculinity) is an indication of Esther's refusal to be trapped any longer. The clothes float in the wind, evoking an ethereal image of changing shapes; the phallic tower stands solid and firm, like "the dark heart" of the patriarchal city itself. As we shall see in the next section Plath was concerned to undermine the cultural ideologies of femininity whilst trying to establish herself within the very genre which seemed to advocate an embrace of constructed womanhood.

Linda Anderson's comments about the relationship between representations of the self,

genre and gender in Plath's work will serve to close our discussion here. Anderson discusses Plath's awareness of the generic distinction between "the heroic and implicitly masculine endeavour of high literary culture," which demands "economy of achievement and sacrifice," and the supposedly more leisurely, less serious, production of popular genres (Anderson: 1997, p.109). The problem for Plath is that if she writes about love and sex in the first person, then she may find herself absorbed into the cultural dogma which insists that the popular genre is "the feminised other of an imagined artistic autonomy." Anderson notes that several of Plath's *Journal* entries agonise over the question of how she should indulge her desire, her penchant for this form, without losing her own autonomy, and her realisation that introspection cannot cure the "true confessional" if the quality of the work is bad (Anderson: 1997, p. 109).

Plath's attempt "to retain authority over the meaning of her text" (in order that her novel might be afforded the tag of "high culture") by widening the gap between the "I" of the text and Plath's own point of view was an attempt which was at first reluctant. Taking control would be a passive response to the "established convention" which constrains female subjectivity in cultural and ideological terms. Anderson suggests that Plath's highly crafted framework within her novel *The Bell Jar* was a resistance to the threat to her originality, as if 'realism' might destroy that; what she wanted was to create "a space in which she could explore definitions of the female subject both in, and we could add, *as fiction*" (Anderson: 1997, p.111). The creation of the third person female characters in her magazine stories, which also contain autobiographical detail, and Plath's adherence to formulaic frameworks more deliberately signals that Plath is crossing the cultural divide whilst attempting to retain her autonomy. I would agree with Anderson that in her prose fiction Plath is opposing these very ideologies of gender which are bound to those of genre. Anderson points us to de Mann's theory of violence and autobiography; he suggests that by producing a representation of the

self we risk "its obliteration by language." But Anderson insists, and I agree, that we take note of sexual difference when we consider distinctions between autobiography and fiction:

gender adds another unsettling twist to the relationship between the fictive or the figurative and the real, the violence written into the oppositions of discourses poses, at the most extreme, the problematic relationship of the subject - any subject - to its culturally positioned object, to the female or feminine body.

Anderson: 1997, p. 113.

As Anderson explains, Plath was aware that writing the self for women is an exercise in objectification which uncovers that which is already fiction. Taking Esther's character as an example Anderson shows how Plath incorporates this theme into her novel: "however hard she may try to imagine otherwise, Esther repeatedly discovers that her gendered body is already commodified, violently appropriated, beyond her control" (Anderson: 1997, p.121). Anderson concludes with the assertion that what Plath could not be aware of was how far *The Bell Jar* would predict "her own reification as cultural myth: the process by which her 'self', appropriated as a commodity, would be used to sell her books" (Anderson: 1997, p.122).

I would suggest that Plath's experiments in popular culture cannot be de-politicised, that Plath's cross-cultural writing is as interesting as those cross-generic forms we have already explored and that, both in terms of fictions of the self and of gender, we have in Plath's shorter fiction a valuable area to investigate.

### **Economics, femininity and popular culture.**

Let us first consider the part that Hughes has played in the posthumous production of Plath as myth and commodity. Following his estranged wife's death, Hughes undertook the role of censor, as well as the critic who introduced Plath's work, offered forewords and editorial comments. Although, as Rose comments, much has been written already on Plath's situation within marriage and much anger has been expressed about the censorship following her death, I feel it is necessary to recover at least some of this ground. In the introduction to the first edition of a collection of prose writings by Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*

which Ted Hughes wrote in 1977, he tells the reader about Plath's ambitions for herself as a writer as well as documenting the various purposes, pre-occupations and practices within the different forms of her writing. As regards her prose writing, and in particular her short stories, Hughes reveals her need to be published and recognised as being supposedly linked to her economic ambitions:

She declared her ambition about two things. The first was to become a proficient story writer, of the high-power practical, popular American type, whose stories could appear in the big journals and earn huge sums of cash and give her the feeling of being a professional with a real job in the real world. [ ... ] Her ambition to write stories was the most visible burden of her life. Successful story-writing, for her, had all the advantages of a top job. She wanted the cash, and the freedom that can go with it. She wanted the professional standing, as a big earner, as the master of a difficult trade, and as a serious investigator into the real world. And finally, not least, she wanted a practical motive for investigating the real world. The fear recurs constantly in her journals that these were all things not naturally hers, they would have to be fought for, as if they belonged naturally only to her opposite. She behaved as if she believed that. So her life became very early a struggle to apprentice herself to writing conventional stories, and to hammer her talents into acceptable shape. 'For me', she wrote, 'poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose.'  
Hughes in *Johnny Panic*: 1977, p.12.

Plath wanted fame for herself as well as for her husband, but nowhere have I found in Plath's writing a grasping after material wealth, or these "huge sums of cash" that Hughes refers to; on the contrary the evidence seems to point away from this. In a journal entry written in Boston in 1958 when Plath was undergoing therapy and re-evaluating her life past, present and future we find the following musings which I feel for my purposes here is worth quoting in some length:

*Writing*: My chain of fear logic goes like this: I want to write stories and poems and a novel and be Ted's wife and a mother to our babies. I want Ted to write as he wants and live where he wants and be my husband and be a father to our babies.

We can't now and maybe never will earn a living by our writing, which is the one profession we want. What will we do for money without sacrificing our energy and time to it and hurting our work? The worst:

What if our work isn't good enough? We get rejections. Isn't this the world's telling us we shouldn't bother to be writers? How can we know if we work hard now and develop ourselves we will be more than mediocre? Isn't this the world's revenge on us for sticking our neck out? We can never know until we've worked, written. We have no guarantee we'll get a Writer's Degree. Weren't the mothers and the business men right after all? Shouldn't we have avoided these disquieting questions and taken steady jobs and secured a good future for the kiddies?

Not unless we want to be bitter all our lives. Not unless we want to feel wistfully: What a writer I *might* have been, if only. If only I'd had the guts to try to work and shoulder all that trial and work implied.

Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reliving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a

day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: they like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge. You do it for itself at first. If it brings in money, how nice. You do not do it first for money. Money isn't why you sit down at the typewriter. Not that you don't want it. It is only too lovely when a profession pays for your bread and butter. With writing, it is maybe, maybe-not. How to live with such insecurity? With what is worst, the occasional lack or loss of faith in the writing itself? How to live with these things?

The worst thing, worse than all of them, would be to live with not writing. So how to live with the lesser devils and keep them lesser?

*Journals*: 1982, pp. 270-271.

Plath wanted to be able to live from writing and frequently questioned whether other jobs were obstructing her progress as an artist. Hence, in her pursuit of the aesthetic she sometimes refused to consider taking jobs in order to dedicate more time to her writing, presumably suffering then from worry about financial hardship and perhaps criticism from those who would like to see the Hughes established in the material world of economics (some of the "lesser devils"), for Ted too viewed any other job than writing as a "prison term" (*Journals*: 1982, p.281). Although her dream of a home was some large exclusive estate (which of course would require wealth), the emphasis in the following journal entry (August 1958) seems to be less on hard cash and more on the desire for privacy and "exile," the dream of an aestheticised life-style, living close to the land:

I find myself horrified at voicing the American dream of a home and children - my visions of a home, of course, being an artist's estate, in a perfect privacy of wilderness acres, on the coast of Maine.

*Journals*: 1982, p.253.

Both Dido Merwin and Lucas Myers criticised Plath's supposed materialism. Merwin goes to some length to explain Plath's greed due to her refusal to furnish the Hughes' first flat from junk shops, preferring instead to surround herself with items more aesthetically pleasing (Stevenson: 1989, p.324-325). Myers writes: "I was afraid Sylvia would pull him into a struggle for income, shoes, tableware, functioning appliances, perhaps into the American English Literature Establishment, a shallow sea hostile to his happiness" (Stevenson: 1989, p.315). The reference here suggests again Myers' insistence on literary hierarchies and his suspicion of the "flashy American" (Stevenson: 1989, p.312).

Plath often preferred to write prose and her desire to write stories for women's magazines lasted throughout her career. Rose suggests that "Plath's yearning for prose is not only part of a distinction between forms of culture (high art versus storytelling) but also belongs to her persistent sexualisation of aesthetic vision" (Rose: 1991, p.119). This is a form of fantasy and language written specifically for women (Rose: 1991, p.120-121). Lynne Pearce raises an important point in her book *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997) in answer to the question of the existence of "women's writing." Pearce defends the notion of its existence due to her own experience of "readerly response" explaining that when she chose to re-position herself as a reader she moved away from male-authored and found "joy and relief" in female-authored texts. She further explains that when she found herself reading texts which were specifically addressed to women this confirmed her notion that "texts *do* gender their readers" and that "'women's writing'" is less defined as "writing by women, or about women, but, more especially writing *for* them" (Pearce: 1997, p.47).

We can also see that Plath's ideas about masculine and feminine writing are not clear cut; she often invokes masculine, as well as feminine impulses ( Rose: 1991, pp.120-121). If we look into Plath's *Journals* we will find many more useful accounts of her relationship with language and its relationship to gender, which would raise questions about Hughes' intimations of material, rather than aesthetic, avarice. That Plath was concerned to forge a career out of writing and was bitterly disappointed about her literary rejections is not in question. But what about her motives? She wanted to be a great writer of original genius; "It is sad to be able only to mouth other poets. I want someone to mouth me" (*Journals*: 1982, p.33), but she was besailed by self-doubt and aware of the hindering effect of her pre-occupation with publication as the juxtapositions here reveal: "I feel great works which may speak from me. Am I a dreamer only? I feel beginning cadences and rhythms of speech to set world-fabrics in motion. Let me keep my eye off publication and simply write stories that have to be written"

(*Journals*: 1982, p194). She learnt a great deal about writing from Woolf and was aware of Woolf's legacy: "Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible" (Plath: 1982, p.168). Whilst Plath believed that her voice was somewhat Woolfish, she seems to want to distance herself to some extent from any mimetic stylistic influence, note here the word "alas": "What is my voice? Woolfish, alas, but tough" (*Journals*: 1982, p.186). Certainly we can trace Woolfian influences in Plath's prose writings in terms of theme and there is clearly a shared desire to find precise expression. In the diary entries we can see that Plath's exacting self-discipline echoes Woolf's need for precision and accuracy.

Like Woolf, Plath also wanted to be able to "become the thing itself" and capture it entirely; "Practice: Be a chair, a toothbrush, a jar of coffee from the inside out: know by feeling in" (*Journals*: 1982, p.182). She wanted to be able to create and "reveal" (*Journals*: 1982, p.168) characters that would endure; "learn other lives and make them into print worlds spinning like planets in the minds of other men" (*Journals*: 1982, p.182). Also, she admired Ted who also taught her these things; "I must recall, recall, out of the stuff of life.... 'Get hold of a thing and shove your head into it,' Ted says just now" (*Journals*: 1982, p.183).

Hughes tells us that Plath was also worried that her own experience would not give her enough material for a great novel, nor even for a short story and hence her writing of prose largely consisted of objective, lifeless cameos of the people she met or attempts to emulate the style and content of those other writers she admired (Hughes in *Journals*: 1977, pp.11, 14). But it was perhaps, more specifically, her experience as a female, and there is ample evidence of her frequent ambivalent attitude towards that condition, which she feared would not offer her the necessary freedom and access to become a professional writer of "high" art. In 1958 Plath notes the distinctive demands in terms of time and situation for the writing of poetry as opposed to prose: "Somehow, to write poems, I need all my time forever ahead of me - no meals to get, no books to prepare ... Prose sustains me. I can mess it, mush it, rewrite it, pick



it up any time" (*Journals*: 1982, p.186). There is repeated evidence that Plath wanted independence, both economic and emotional, and this fuelled her craving for a profession of her own. In September 1951, pre-Hughes, she writes:

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

At any rate, I admit that I am not strong enough, or rich enough, or independent enough, to live up to my ideal standards. You ask me, what are those ideal standards? Good for you. The only escape (do I sound Freudian?) from the present setup as I see it is in the exercise of a phase of life inviolate and separate from that of my future mate, and from all males with whom I might live. I am not only jealous; I am vain and proud. I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect."

*Journals*: 1982, p.35.

These sentiments were later to re-appear in Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* when Esther's mother encourages her daughter to learn short-hand typing, rather than merely rely on her English degree, so that she can be useful to some future husband:

Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.

The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters.

*Bell Jar*: 1966, p.79.

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

*Bell Jar*: 1966, p.87.

Despite Plath's obvious love for Hughes, she became worried sometimes that married life had dulled her ambitions and she was afraid that she had become too dependent on him.

Despite the fact that she had written what she describes as some of her best poetry at Smith College in March 1958 (*Journals*: 1982, p.209), later that year in Boston, she was frequently lamenting what she considered to be her "incompetence" as regards her prose writing and lack of a plot for a novel. She tormented herself with reprimands regarding her creative "paralysis," sometimes blaming their "sedentary" life-style (*Journals*: 1982, p.253), sometimes wondering if she was being affected by Ted's dominant personality:

My danger, partly I think, is becoming too dependent on Ted. He is didactic, fanatic - [...] It is as if I were sucked into a tempting but disastrous whirlpool. Between us there are no barriers - it is rather as if neither of us - or especially myself - had any skin, or one skin between us and we kept bumping into and abrading each other. I enjoy it when Ted is off for a bit. I can build up my own inner life, my own thoughts, without his continuous 'What are you thinking/ What are you going to do now?' which makes me recalcitrantly stop thinking and doing. We are amazingly compatible. But I must be myself - make myself and not let myself be made by him. He gives orders - [...].

*Journals*: 1982, p245.

It is interesting that in the introduction to the second edition of *Johnny Panic* (1979) Hughes validates the publication of some of the stories only because of their relation to her life:

Sylvia Plath herself had certainly rejected several of the stories, so they are printed against her better judgement. That must be taken into account. But in spite of the obvious weaknesses, they seem interesting enough to keep, if only as notes towards her inner autobiography.  
Hughes in *Journals*: 1979, p.12.

Plath's ambitions were not just those of an aspiring artist; after her marriage she was concerned to cook and care for her husband and frequently writes about her domestic duties in her journal. Mostly these notes are clearly written with affection and she was pleased to feel missed and needed when, during a spell in hospital following a miscarriage and appendectomy, Ted told her that he was struggling with the child-care and domestic chores which were presumably his wife's main responsibility:

Ted is actually having a rougher time than I - poor love sounded quite squashed yesterday: 'How do you do it all?... The pooker makes an astonishing amount of pots to wash....She wets a lot' and 'I seem to be eating mostly bread!' I felt needed and very happy and lucky.  
*Journals*: 1982, p.338.

As we have seen, Plath's journal entries do show, however, some contradictions and ambiguities in her attitude towards the domestic role she had undertaken. She mentions a particular row between them which had resulted from an occasion where Ted had criticised her in front of others for not sewing buttons on shirts or darning socks (*Journals*: 1982, p.276). Plath was constantly looking forward to the idea of motherhood after her marriage although she was frequently telling herself to get some writing done before she had children and was concerned that the career of both motherhood and writing might be difficult. During a period when she had stopped ovulating (June 1959) Plath is clearly afraid of the threat of an

inability to be maternally creative which echoes those entries which express her paralysis and barrenness in relation to her writing. As an antidote to this fear she seems to luxuriate in the idea of a domestic idyll conjuring images of herself as an "Earth Mother":

I would bear children until my change of life it that were possible. I want a house full of our children, little animals, flowers, vegetables, fruits. I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me. And what do I meet in myself? Ash. Ash and more ash.

[...] Suddenly the deep foundations of my being are gnawn. I have come, with great pain and effort, to a point where my desires and emotions and thoughts center around what the normal woman's center around, and what do I find? Barrenness.

*Journals*: 1982, p.310.

Fear of betrayal by the female body seems to be inextricably bound up with Plath's attitude towards herself as a woman, in a feminine role, and herself as a writer as we can see from the following extract written earlier in the year (January, 1959):

*Don't wake up in the morning because I want to go back to the womb. From now on: see if this is possible: set alarm for 7:30 and get up then, tired or not. Rip through breakfast and housecleaning (bed and dishes, mopping or whatever) by 8:30. Ted got coffee and oatmeal today: he doesn't like to do it, but does it. I am a fool to let him. Alarm-setting gets over the bother of waking at ragged hours around nine.*

Be writing before 9, that takes the curse off it. It is now almost 11. I have washed two sweaters, the bathroom floor, mopped, done a day's dishes, made the bed, folded the laundry and stared in horror at my face: it is old before its time.

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

*Journals*: 1982, p.286.

So Plath had found herself again caught within what she describes as a "vicious circle." She had earlier been aware of the danger of such domestic isolation and the interiority of their life-style, where she had no one to speak to but Ted, and when she did take a job it was partly to seek out "fresh exterior experiences" so that she could write about someone other than herself and move away from the experience of being "too ingrown" where she sits with her "face to a wall, a mirror" (*Journals*: 1982, p. 260). The poems which she had earlier in the year been pleased with were ones where she had been able to draw on her own "real

experience of life" which she felt had been "shutup, untouchable, in a rococco crystal cage, not to be touched" for the previous five years (*Journals: 1982*, p.209).

Hughes continues his introduction to the first edition of the prose collection *Johnny Panic* with the observation that Plath's best work was produced when she allowed herself to be subjective and use her own life as source, such as the writing of "Johnny Panic" where she used her own experience alongside, and perhaps spurred on by, that of working in the mental patients' department of Massachusetts General Hospital:

It was only when she gave up that effort to 'get outside' herself, and finally accepted the fact that her painful subjectivity was her real theme, and that the plunge into herself was her only real direction, and that poetic strategies were her only real means, that she suddenly found herself in full possession of her genius - with all the special skills that had developed as if by biological necessity, to deal with those unique inner conditions.

Nevertheless, her stories are much more interesting than she thought. They seem livelier now, in some ways, than they did when she wrote them. And their vitality comes from the very thing she was always striving to escape: the themes she found engaging enough to excite her concentration all turn out to be episodes from her own life: they are all autobiography. They have the vitality of her personal participation, her subjectivity. And all are circling the flames which the poetry, encouraged by 'Johnny Panic' and *The Bell Jar*, eventually jumped into.

Hughes in *Johnny Panic*: 1977, pp.15-16.

"Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" ends with a startling and vivid image of the shock treatment Plath had earlier in her life received, an experience which later she was to re-work in *The Bell Jar*. The tone throughout this short story is largely ironic and the voice is often racy and humorous where she incorporates narratives of the inmates' experiences within the main narrative which is a scathing attack on mental institutions and their practices. Where Plath tries her hand at objectivity Hughes suggests that she crushes "the life out of the narrative" but where she wants to "record" without thought of publication or of "artful shaping", as in the private journal extracts he allows to appear in this collection, she produces her "most effective" writing. But Plath was disgusted with what she considered to be the inability to "get outside" herself in her stories. She criticises the artificiality of the pieces where she feels that she has not been able to explore and develop "the deep emotional undercurrents" of her *characters and their relationships* because she is constantly shutting out her own subjectivity:

"As if little hygienic trap-doors shut out the seethe and deep-grounded swell of my experience. Putting up pretty artificial statues" (*Journals*: 2000, pp.501-502).

In his foreword to Plath's *Journals* Hughes continues to emphasise that the failure of some of her work was largely due to Plath's "ambition" regarding her pre-occupation with publication in specific magazines and her consequent "efforts to produce what the market seemed to require." He continues:

The impulse to apprentice herself to various masters and to adapt her writing potential to practical, profitable use was almost an instinct with her. She went about it, as these journals show, with a relentless passion, and yet with a fever of uncertainty and self doubt. This campaign of wilful ideals produced everything in her work that seems artificial.

Hughes in *Journals*: 1982, p. xiii.

After moralising about artificiality Hughes writes of "alchemy," and suggests that the "sympathetic reader" of the *Journals* will appreciate that the "apprenticeship writings" (the stories) were "like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work." *We should read these "by-products" as "outermost" aspects* "of a drive that was moving all the time in quite a different direction" (Hughes in *Journals*: 1982, p.xiii). Hughes' point is important because of the implied insistence on high art. Rose notes Hughes' moralistic "charge of falsity" and draws our attention to the fact that editorial decisions regarding the value of Plath's work which is considered as part of a "low" culture is evident here. Plath's "experiments with popular fictional forms" were censored from the earlier journals whereas the editors allow the publication of the "tracts of stream-of-consciousness writing after her breakdown (writing as high art, as the most intimate inner drama of herself)" (Rose: 1991, p. 82).

### **The Wishing Box (1956)**

Plath's short story "The Wishing Box" is a disturbing narrative about a newly married couple whose dream-life becomes a source of conflict between them. This story not only reflects aspects of Plath's life experience but also contains some interesting passages which relate

directly to Hughes' autobiographical stories. The husband in "The Wishing Box" whose dreams are vivid, superior and belong in the world of high culture, is oblivious to his wife's jealousy and feelings of inadequacy but within the opening lines the conflict is indicated by the bitter tone:

Agnes Higgins realized only too well the cause of her husband Harold's beatific, absent-minded expression over his morning orange juice and scrambled eggs.

'Well,' Agnes sniffed, smearing beach-plum jelly on her toast with vindictive strokes of the butter knife, 'what did you dream last night?'

*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.48.

Harold's dreams not only belong in the world of classical music and literature but also become "meticulous works of art" as he narrates them. His "astonishingly quick, colorful imagination" is contrasted with that of Agnes whose images are formless and dark, "fragmentary scenes of horror" which she cannot recall or narrate "for fear they reflected too unflatteringly upon her own powers of imagination" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.50). Only in her childhood were Agnes' dreams vivid with color and symbolic images. Now she was "ousted" from "those benevolent painted dream worlds." Harold's dream world, on the other hand, continues to be just as symbolic as it has always been and the narrator gives two examples which are unmistakably taken from Ted Hughes' dream-life experience:

Once, at a depressing and badly-aspected time of Harold's life before he met Agnes, Harold dreamed that a red fox ran through his kitchen, grievously burnt, its fur charred black, bleeding from several wounds. Later, Harold confided, at a more auspicious time shortly after his marriage to Agnes, the red fox had appeared again, miraculously healed, with flourishing fur, to present Harold with a bottle of permanent black Quink. Harold was particularly fond of his fox dreams; they recurred often. So, notably, did his dream of the giant pike. 'There was this pond,' Harold informed Agnes one sultry August morning, 'where my cousin Albert and I used to fish; it was chock full of pike. Well, last night I was fishing there, and I caught the most enormous pike you could imagine - it must have been the great-great-grandfather of all the rest; I pulled and pulled and pulled, and still he kept coming out of that pond.'

*Johnny Panic*: 1979, pp.50-51.

The fox and pike are recognisable icons from Hughes' poetry and appear in his first collection, *Hawk in the Rain* (1957). Recent media coverage of Hughes, following his death, has shown Hughes himself narrating, almost exactly, the above dreams as being part of his own mythology. In the BBC's *Close Up on Ted Hughes* (24.12.1998) the fox dream was

presented as being a historical turning point in Hughes' education, the catalyst which urged him to change his course at Cambridge from English Literature to Anthropology. Hughes tells us his dream story; he was struggling late into the night to finish an essay, his last in this subject, when finally he gave up trying "to push through the barriers" and went to bed:

I immediately dreamed that I was back at my table and, in my dream, as I sat at my table, over my essay, the door opened and round the side of the door came the head of a fox - the height of a man. And I watched him, he came down the stair and he was a man, a small man. So, he was just a fox, on his hind legs, walking like a man. And, as he came across the room towards me, I saw that he was - it was as if he had come out of a furnace - his whole body was one burn. He put out his hand and it was a human hand but it was all burned, the hand was just as burned as the rest of his body, so it was all blackened and cracked and bleeding. And he put his hand on the page and lifted it up and there was a blood-print of his hand on the page. And as he put it down he said "You have to stop this , you're destroying us."

Through this dream, then, Hughes received the revelation that the academic study of literature was stifling his creativity and preventing his ability to write poetry. On the *Close Up* programme John Carey explains that "the animal dynamism" which Hughes wanted in his poetry was "not to do with the intellect" which is required for "the inspection, analysis and study of English Literature." Anthropology, on the other hand, suited better Hughes' purposes: "The study of ancient cultures and myth fuelled his interest and fed into his poetry."

Hughes' narration of his giant pike dream recently appeared in a previously unpublished interview given to Thomas Pero of a US angling magazine and was published by *The Weekend Guardian* (9.1.99) under the title "Poet, pike and a pitiful grouse." Here Hughes speaks about his recurring dreams and his belief that pike "have a totally different mystique" so people "become hooked on pike at some very deep level." Here is his story:

I began to dream regularly about pike and about one particular lake where I did most of my fishing. Pike had become fixed at some very active, deep level in my imaginative life. This recurrent dream was always an image of how I was feeling about life.

When I was feeling good, I'd have dreams full of giant pike that were perhaps also leopards ... always in that particular lake. They'd become symbols of deep, vital life. That's how I see it. My obsession with pike maybe was my obsession with those energies. It was a psychological thing. This went on for years. A very bad time might produce a nightmare dream of the lake lined with concrete and empty.

Rose suggests that the fox dream in "The Wishing Box" is a fantasy which refers to Plath's

desire to "repair" Hughes' past "destructiveness" towards "things and people" (evidence Rose has gathered from unpublished letters to Plath's mother written at the beginning of the relationship with Hughes, Rose: 1991: pp.124-125).

The only dream which Agnes recounts to her husband in "The Wishing Box" is a childhood fantasy of Superman, a figure from popular culture. Harold is "visibly impressed" and realises, for the first time, that he has never thought of "playing listener" or asking about his wife's dreams because he has been so preoccupied with his own. The husband who has previously looked "right through the very attractive and tangible form of his wife" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.48) *at breakfast now looks "at her pretty, troubled countenance with new interest: Agnes was, Harold paused to observe for perhaps the first time since their early married days, an extraordinarily attractive sight across the breakfast table"* (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.51). He asks about her current dream-life and Agnes confesses, having rejected the idea of stealing ideas from Freud, that she does not have dreams anymore.

The narrative continues with Harold's instruction to imagine a goblet which Agnes has to describe to him. Her complaint that her images, conjured "with great effort," remain in the "back" of her head is met with a response which further convinces Agnes that her imagination is inferior: "I see my dreams on the front of my eyelids, like on a movie-screen. They just come; I don't have anything to do with them" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.52). Harold tells her to continue practising just as he has taught her, but Agnes begins instead to read while Harold is at work in order to fill her mind with images:

Seized by a kind of ravenous hysteria, she raced through novels, women's magazines, newspapers, and even anecdotes in her Joy of Cooking; she read travel brochures, home appliance circulars, the Sears Roebuck Catalogue, the instructions on soap-flake boxes, the blurbs on the back of record-jackets - anything to keep from facing the gaping void in her own head of which Harold had made her so painfully conscious. But as soon as she lifted her eyes from the printed matter at hand, it was as if a protecting world had been extinguished.  
*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.53.

Hughes' introduction to the second edition of the *Johnny Panic* collection includes an



interesting passage which relates to Plath's imagination and writing practices and which also relates to the next part of this short story. Having referred to the "obvious weaknesses" of some of the stories in this collection, he continues:

Some of them demonstrate, even more badly than the stronger stories, just how much the sheer objective presence of things and happenings immobilized her fantasy and invention. The still-life graphic artist in her was loyal to objects. Nothing refreshed her more than sitting for hours in front of some pile of things laboriously delineating each one. But that was also a helplessness. The blunt fact killed any power or inclination to rearrange it or see it differently. This limitation to actual circumstances, which is the prison of so much of her prose, became part of the solidity and truth of her later poems.

Hughes in *Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.12

Now let us regard the above statements in the light of the following passage from Plath in

"The Wishing Box" which would seem to corroborate in fictional form what Hughes claims was Plath's experience:

The utterly self-sufficient, unchanging reality of the things surrounding her began to depress Agnes. With a jealous awe, her frightened, almost paralysed stare took in the Oriental rug, the Williamsburg-blue wallpaper, the gilded dragons on the Chinese upholstered sofa on which she was sitting. She felt choked, smothered by these objects whose bulky pragmatic existence somehow threatened the deepest, most secret roots of her own ephemeral being. Harold, she knew only too well, would tolerate no such vainglorious nonsense from tables and chairs: if he didn't like the scene at hand, if it bored him, he would change it to suit his fancy. If, Agnes mourned, in some sweet hallucination an octopus came slithering towards her across the floor, paisley-patterned in purple and orange, she would bless it. Anything to prove that her shaping imaginative powers were not irretrievably lost; that her eye was not merely an open camera lens which recorded surrounding phenomena and left it at that. 'A rose', she found herself repeating hollowly like a funeral dirge, 'is a rose is a rose....'

*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.53.

Reminiscent of Esther's experience in *The Bell Jar* Agnes soon finds that she cannot read.

The words on the page seem to fulfil her longing for hallucination but rather than "sweet", here the image is nightmarish; "the letters separated, writhing like malevolent little black snakes across the page in a kind of hissing, untranslatable jargon" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.54). Literature is swiftly replaced by movies, rather than images behind her eyelids this way she can get "the fluid kaleidoscope of forms before her eyes" and this lulls "her into a rhythmic trance; the voices, speaking some soothing, unintelligible code, exorcised the dead silence in her head" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.54).

The constant intake of television and sherry result in the ability to change her view of

Harold at will. She enjoys the blurring images of his face when he returns from work with "malicious satisfaction" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.54). Although she argues that sherry relaxes her, Agnes begins to suffer from insomnia. She lies awake next to her dreaming husband off

on "some rare, wonderful adventure":

Finally, a bleak, clear awareness of what was happening broke upon her: the curtains of sleep, of refreshing, forgetful darkness dividing each day from the day before it, and the day after it, were lifted for Agnes eternally, irrevocably. She saw an intolerable prospect of wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her, her mind condemned to perfect vacancy, without a single image of its own to ward off the assault of smug, autonomous tables and chairs. She might, Agnes reflected sickly, live to be a hundred: the women in her family were all long lived.  
*Johnny Panic*: 1979, pp.54-55.

Harold returns home after an illuminating bus ride to find that his wife has committed suicide, having obtained some sleeping pills from the doctor, :

he found Agnes lying on the sofa in the living room, dressed in her favourite princess-style emerald taffeta evening gown, pale and lovely as a brown lily, eyes shut, an empty pillbox and an overturned water tumbler on the rug at her side. Her tranquil features were set in a slight, secret smile of triumph, as if, in some far country unattainable to mortal men, she were, at last, waltzing with the dark, red-caped prince of her early dreams.  
*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.55

Finally, isolation and domestic boredom have been superseded by an exotic, everlasting dream of the superhero of her childhood dreams.

Rose suggests that "The Wishing Box" can be read "as an allegory for poetic rivalry between Plath and Hughes" and that "sexual difference" is represented here, and in other stories: "in terms of a struggle over different forms of imagination, a different register, for the man and for the woman, in the world of signs" (Rose: 1991, p.179). Harold "who has the prerogative of the imagination" is able to indulge his cultural, rather than sexual, wish fulfilments by dreaming dreams which propel him "above his station" (Rose: 1991, p.180). Only at the time of her death can Agnes achieve her fantasy and then she transforms herself into "the heroine of a romantic film," becoming the embodiment of her own ideal (Rose: 1991, pp.180-181). As Rose further explains, this story is ambiguous in its claims for or against popular culture; either it kills or it saves Agnes, providing "the very means and forms of her

escape." Either it leads to "passivity and lethargy" (the trance) or it empowers Agnes so that she can imagine transformations (Harold's face) and change things by her own will. Rose continues: "it is the intoxicating power of vulgarity which breaks her out of the deadening, self-sufficient, unchanging reality of *things*" and, contrary to Hughes' suggestions in the passage above, in Plath's fantasy it is not poetry which "releases the woman's imagination from the killing objectivity of the world" but popular culture (Rose: 1991, pp.181-182). Rose also suggests that the central theme within this short story is that "the man's unconscious can be experienced as coercion by the woman" and that it is Harold's insistence that Agnes should dream which leads to her suicide (Rose: 1991, p.153).

Elisabeth Bronfen describes this story as a direct "dismantling of the conventional gender of creation" (Bronfen: 1998, p.103). Within the battle of dream narratives, Agnes is marginalised: "an exile from a large part of her husband's psychic reality, Plath discloses a fatal strategy of duplicity in her heroine's psychic reality" (Bronfen: 1998, p.103) (10).

Agnes initially adheres to her husband's rejection of her memories of childhood imagination and tries to follow his instruction. Meeting with failure she then tries to fill the void with mass culture: women's magazines and mind dulling women's day-time television. With her new-found addiction to media and alcohol she can transform reality into fantasy. Her suicide is triumphant because she has become the embodiment of the sign, she is living fiction, performing her imagination rather than merely recounting her fantasies over the breakfast table. I would agree with Bronfen that the final image of Agnes "as a dolled-up corpse" has a significant implications in terms of the cultural performativity dictated by American society (11).

### **Day of Success (1960)**

Hughes introduces Plath's later story "Day of Success" which appears in *Johnny Panic* as "an example of her efforts at pastiche." Although her stories "for the more sentimental English

women's magazines" show "a slightly freer range of invention" he criticises the writing because "one can feel the rigidity of the objective situation elbowing the life out of the narrative" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.12). In fact, despite some uncharacteristic clumsiness of style, we can read this story as a more serious attempt to follow the formulaic criteria which is demanded of the short story suitable for publication in women's magazines, especially when we consider the premise that heroines should overcome the difficulty which besets them. Drawing from my own experience of writing for women's popular magazines it seems that the recipe consists of four stages: **conflict** - which produces the impulse of the plot. The essence/source of conflict exists outside the boundaries of the narrative and in the case of this story the threat is that a newly successful husband will leave his homely wife, seduced by a more glamorous and successful rival. The second ingredient, **crisis**, brings the conflict into the narrative and stimulates change producing a causal link to the next stage; **climax** - the turning point. The final element, **resolution**, is the narration of how the main protagonist deals with the conflict situation and whatever changes have occurred within the plot.

At the opening of the story, Ellen, housewife and mother, is already showing signs of insecurity. Her reaction to the ringing of the telephone in the first sentence causes her to freeze, take stock of her perfect family life, and pray that nothing should shatter their domestic bliss. We learn that her husband is expecting a call which could lead him to fame and fortune and that one of her friends was abandoned when her own husband achieved success. Insecurity, due to her feelings of being dowdy and her knowledge of her friend's misery, lead Ellen to feelings of intense fear and jealousy. In the denouement it is clear that the success not only refers to her husband's recognition as a writer but also Ellen's ability to rise above her lack of self-esteem.

Following an unsettling journey through the glossy magazines at the doctor's surgery where images of perfect women make Ellen feel even more inadequate, plus a visit from her formerly

abandoned friend, Ellen dresses up for her husband's return from lunch with an attractive female producer. She reprimands herself for not making such an effort everyday. However, by the time he returns she has bathed and fed the baby, thus spoiling her clothes and the expensive scent she has used extravagantly is over-masked by the smell of baby food. Jacob has decided not to work with the archetypal homewrecker and has instead made plans to buy a cottage in Cornwall thus fulfilling their shared dreams of domestic perfection in a romantic idyll. The final line is a clear indication of Ellen's security as she tells her friend she does not need an expensive city hair-cut: "Braids are back in style this season, love - the latest thing for the country wife!" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.198). Of course Ellen's self-esteem is restored when she realises that she can trust her husband, therefore her happiness is dependent on his love for her, rather than a surety in her own self-worth. This character is also not in competition with her husband. She seems to have no desire to do anything except care for him, their home and his child. She also supports his work by acting as his secretary. She performs to perfection the cultural construction of the feminine homemaker and mate.

But do we like Ellen? Isn't her rebuff smug, an unfriendly rebuttal towards her helpful, if misguided friend's suggestion that she indulge in feminine trickery? Is this happy ending anything more than precarious? I would suggest that although the framework of the story follows exactly the marketing demands for the women's magazine industry, Plath's subversion is evident in the style and tone of this piece. I can only read the multiple clichés as signs that Plath was deliberately distancing herself from both the character and the plot of this short story. At first look, an avid reader of her work can do no other than cringe and pull away from the narrative when we come across such sentences. A second reaction might be that Plath was writing this story with her tongue in her cheek. Let's first consider the style and tone of the opening paragraph:

Ellen was on her way to the bedroom with an armload of freshly folded nappies when the phone rang, splintering the stillness of the crisp autumn morning. For a moment she froze on the threshold, taking in the peaceful scene as if she might never see it again - the delicate rose-patterned wallpaper, the forest-green cord drapes she'd hemmed by hand while waiting for the baby to come, the old-fashioned four-poster inherited from a loving but moneyless aunt, and, in the corner, the pale pink crib holding sound asleep six-month old Jill, the centre of it all.

*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.185.

Whose voice is this? The overloading of adjectives (nearly every object has a familiar, therefore powerless descriptor) and the stereotypical "pale pink crib" make the reader recoil immediately from the narrative voice which is painting such a clichéd and unrealistic scene. The only word in this passage doing any work at all is "splintering" and that is later undone by the "crisp" which attaches itself unoriginally to "autumn morning." Ellen thinks in clichés "*This is it [...] The beginning of the end*" and even the imagery is trite and vaguely comical: the telephone is a "small, black instrument of doom" (*Johnny Panic*: 1979, p.185). Does Plath mean to insult her imagined readers? I doubt it. I think what we have here is an example of Plath's ability to express through the undercurrent of tone and style her own duplicitous and uncomfortable relationship with the cultural ideal of a perfect wife and mother. She too wanted to care for Hughes and support his work, she too wanted to raise their children in a rural idyll. But she also wanted to be an accomplished writer. Perhaps the suggestion here is that to sacrifice one's personal ambition wholly to the domestic leads to an intense dulling of the brain. We can read this and Plath's other prose writings as a clear message to Ted and her other readers that she considered the prescribed female domestic role could have a detrimental effect on creativity.

Whilst Plath was playing with happy endings there is also the underlying knowledge that "apple-pie happiness" may also be poisoned by hidden worms (Bronfen: 1998, p.124). Complicity with cultural prescriptions of ideal femininity is an unsettling theme here and, as Bronfen points out, something monstrous lurks beneath the surface of the text:

By emphasizing how inextricably linked her heroine's self-identity is with the products of contemporary popular culture, to the extent that the disclosed toxic remains, supposedly excluded

from any happy self-image, cannot in fact be distinguished from the cleaned artificial surface. Plath offers us an utterly compelling representation of how, in the highly commercialized and media infiltrated culture of the late twentieth century Western world, we are the signs we consume even while we are consumed by them. Furthermore, in the light of the political unrest that has begun to emerge as a fifty-years after effect, given that the opening of the archives pertaining to all the shared secrets upon which post-Second World War prosperity was based means confronting the remains preserved in our collective cultural crypt, Plath's insistence that clandestine traumatic knowledge not only always haunts its host but will strike back and shatter protective fictions of infallibility with a force equal to the effort put into repressing this truth suddenly seems uncannily pertinent. In hindsight, the Ivy Smith girl who can do everything with a clean bright smile on her face is in fact a horrific monster, because we cannot help but sense the forces of destruction lurking beneath the duplicitous surface of utterly perfect artificiality. Bronfen, 1998, pp.125-126.

I do not believe that the reader is invited to herald Ellen's self-satisfaction as anything other than a smug self-delusion. In this denouement there is no sense of triumph, in fact, Ellen has not escaped but merely allowed herself to be further duped by what appears on the surface to be domestic bliss. There is no horizon beyond this. What lies beneath is the certainty that Ellen will continue in her role as secretary, mother, housewife. There is nowhere the suggestion that Ellen either desires or will encounter any possibility of intellectual development. There is no sense of balancing options here, nor is there any sense of the duplicitous attitude we have found in Plath's *Journals*. This heroine has succumbed blindly and willingly to the American dream. She is "happily, stodgily practical" (*Journals*: 2000, p.269).

Whether or not we read these short stories as an articulation of the dilemmas Plath faced in her own domestic situation, we cannot ignore the wider political implications of such work. I believe that reading the biographical details of her own marriage into Plath's texts is less important than a feminist reading of her prose. In the next section of this chapter I shall investigate the relationship and dialogue between the poetry of Hughes and Plath, an area of scholarship which has recently opened up largely due to the publication of Hughes' *Birthday Letters* in 1998.

## **"It's only a story / Your Story. My Story." Ted Hughes' "Visit"**

Much renewed interest in Plath has been sparked by the publication of Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* (1998) which was hailed in the media as a breaking of the poet laureate's thirty-five year silence about his first marriage, kept since Plath's suicide in February 1963. This book has marked something of a turning point in several respects, not least because it has created an arena wherein Hughes has told, through poetry, his version of their love affair, marriage and the after-effects of Plath's death. This rhetorical poetic correspondence to a late wife is also addressed to a public audience. Private details of the couple's lives become commodities in the literary market, hence Plath is, yet again sold and bought as a curiosity. The headlining of this collection has been latterly accompanied by those which mourn the loss of its author who died nine months after its publication in October 1998. When Hughes' death was announced on the BBC's *Six O'clock News* the report was dominated by an outline of his marriage to Plath. There were five photographs, two of Hughes' alone at the beginning and the end of the report, and within this framework appeared one of Hughes and Plath (taken when they were married), one of Plath with her babies (as we are told that he suffered much criticism because he left her) and one of Plath alone (as we are told about her suicide). And so we are brought back to the person and the life of Plath through media coverage of the recently published *Birthday Letters* and the death of Hughes.

Also, the recent publication of Plath's *Journals* edited by Karen Kukil (2000) marked a turning point as regards former censorship of Plath (12). This edition contains the complete remaining Journals from the originals at Smith College, Massachusetts. Hughes authorised the opening of previously sealed journals before his death and passed the copyright over to their two children Frieda and Nicholas. Following Hughes' death, then, our access to "a complete and historically accurate text" has finally been permitted (Kukil in *Journals*: 2000, p



ix). This publication was also accompanied by media coverage which once again brought the person of Plath into view. *The Guardian* printed a week's worth of extracts from the new publication with commentary by Katherine Viner in March 2000. The first of these appeared in *The Weekend* supplement with a front page photograph of Plath and the headline: "A Life Reclaimed. Sylvia Plath: Her Journals revealed at last." Adverts for the text included the captions: "Everyone knows how Sylvia Plath died. Now discover how she lived" and "Read the thoughts of Sylvia Plath's harshest critic. Herself." In answer to her own headline question "Who is Sylvia?" Viner outlines briefly the factual, biographical details of Plath's life, mentions the poems, the novel, the letters, and her husband's poems but tells us that only the Journals reveal Plath's "private thoughts and feelings." Viner claims that "the silent woman" (13) at last speaks for herself (Viner: *The Guardian*, March 18, 2000). In *The Daily Telegraph* (April 1, 2000) Allison Pearson reviews *The Journals*, describing the unabridged text as "the longest suicide note ever written." Whilst she notes that Plath's writing contains "a riveting social document" of life for a young woman in Fifties America, she also asks whether Plath is a "suitable figurehead" for "the sisterhood" given her "Mills and Boon" descriptions of her love for Hughes and her "Bridget Jones" listings of how she should live in order "to win friends and influence people" (see *Journals*, April 1st, 1956). In answer to her second question of whether there is anything new to be learnt from *The Journals*, Pearson points out that "Plath fundamentalists" may gain the pleasure of comparing dates with letters but quickly moves us back to Hughes' *Birthday Letters* which she now reads differently because she hears the echoes of Plath's *Journals* within them:

This time I could hear Sylvia's vocabulary - her precise words- gonging through his verse. He must have taken those diary pages to heart - and to mind - in a way we can hardly begin to comprehend. Perhaps there are things buried in there which he unearthed from the missing journals: it is a literary riddle he has taken to the grave.  
Pearson, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1st April, 2000.

It is clear that the publication of *Birthday Letters* marked Hughes' intention of bringing

Plath back into the public eye and differing reports as to the reason for this have been prevalent both prior to and following his death. *The Times* seemed particularly keen to promote this latest work and offered nearly a weeks' worth of extracts from the collection prior to its publication along with biographical details about Plath, Hughes and their relationship. On the first day of this coverage, Saturday 17 January 1998, readers were invited into this "private" world with sensationalist headings such as: "After years of *abuse* from critics, Ted Hughes tells his *own* story of his marriage to Sylvia Plath;" "Poet Laureate breaks *decades of silence*. Erica Wagner reports on a *startling* new book in which Hughes *confronts the pain* of his past;" "A *thunderbolt* from the blue: this book *will live forever*. Andrew Motion on the Ted Hughes collection that few friends thought they would ever see;" and on the front page, "*Revealed: the most tragic literary love story* of our time," (my emphasis). The impact of this publication seems, in part, to hang on the very fact that it came so late, and after such adamant refusal to indulge readers with peep-hole information which might have, in some way, allayed judgement and suspicion regarding Hughes' part in Plath's demise. Tom Paulin is reported to have said that *Birthday Letters* was "an eloquent answer to his critics: 'Hughes admirers will feel that here is someone emerging from a tragic silence. It is definitive, and I very much hope it will silence his detractors'" (*The Times*, 19.1.98).

More recently, following the public announcement of Hughes' death (his illness was not largely known), came the suggestion that this collection was, at least in part, a swan-song. In the BBC's *Close Up* programme (24.12.98) the collection was described as a book which "the world never expected to see" and which consequently "stunned the literary world." Tom Paulin suggested in this programme that Hughes' was attempting to "put his house in order" (a concept Paulin finds "scary"). He continued with the claim that Hughes' had "silenced his critics" because finally he had told us: (in Paulin's words) "I've had this extraordinary relationship ... I've been made to suffer by those whose business it wasn't." This suggests a

need for public acceptance and justification. Seamus Heaney, in the same programme says that he can only "guess" at why Hughes published *Birthday Letters* but is "sure" that it has something to do with "impatience or rage." Heaney explains that formerly Hughes had "kept silent" (presumably resisting the above impulses) "because of a perception that if he entered into giving his version of events it would only become another version, as if he had no particular extra authority." Heaney seems to suggest that the solution to this lack of authority was to present his version in poetic form; "the only way to enter into it decisively was to enter poetically." The question which I found myself asking is what impact these poems of 'private' angst, written over a period of thirty years, would have on readers of Plath and Hughes?

Heaney explains the overwhelming effect of the collection on him as a reader and the "sense of clandestine access to this material." More recently, in a presentation speech for the ITV's *South Bank Show Awards* (25.1.99), we find Heaney in the position of defending Hughes, whose *Birthday Letters* had won the Literature Award, his readers and poetry. His loyal accolade: this was a poet who in his lifetime had suffered "the death of privacy," *Birthday Letters* was Hughes' "counter offensive," its popularity has less to do with the reader's desire for "sensational revelations" (or perhaps "clandestine access") and everything to do with the "instinctive" recognition of "a need to be more serious," and non more deserving than Hughes of "the high honours surrounding the word poet." When Frieda Hughes received the 1998 *Whitbread Book of the Year Award* (26.1.99) she read from a letter which Hughes had sent to a close friend shortly after the publication of *Birthday Letters*. These words, she explained, could express better than anyone else could on his behalf his reasoning:

"I think these letters do release the story that everything I have written since the early 1960s has been evading. It was in a kind of desperation that I finally did publish them. I had always thought them unpublishably raw and unguarded, simply too vulnerable. But then I just could not endure being blocked any longer. How strange that we have to make these public declarations of our secrets. But we do. If only I had done the equivalent thirty years ago I might have had a more fruitful career, certainly a freer psychological life. Even now I feel the sensation of inner liberation, a sudden huge possibility of new inner experience. Quite strange."

Also interesting is the fact that acclaim from critics seems to focus on the newness of Hughes' poetic style in this collection. Before its general release critical response to *Birthday Letters* was documented in *The Times* by Erica Wagner. Wagner herself had introduced the work, in her leading article, as narratives "almost conversational in tone" which revealed Hughes "at his most accessible and heartfelt." Conversely, Andrew Motion notes the "more symbolic and private" language of the final poems where "Hughes' need for self-protection" becomes "intense" due to the difficulty of representing the time when Plath was writing *Ariel* and "increasingly volatile":

In the short term, these final poems will probably be less admired than the rest of the book. In the fullness of time, they should be reckoned its finest achievement: poetry staggering under the weight of its emotional load, but keeping its dignity and purpose.  
*The Times*, 17.1.98.

Following the introduction of Hughes' work and the publication of three poems from the collection on Saturday 17 January 1998, Elaine Showalter's reaction was reported on Monday 19, when the series was continued: "It's absolutely thrilling," she said. "I always thought I probably would not live long enough to see what Ted Hughes had to say about Sylvia Plath. The poems, just the ones that are printed, are really interesting because they are so different from what he has done before. They are so loose." Professor James Fenton, Oxford, notes not only the interest in content but also the striking "intensity with which he still comes to the subject." Tom Paulin talks of "mystical humanism", "medieval quality" and the "great authenticity" of the poems in *The Times* but on the BBC *Close Up* programme he praises the epistolary novel form, Hughes' "writing to the moment" in "direct statements to Plath." He talks of the "intimacy, spontaneity and casualness of the letter form" with its "honesty and sincerity" and its "risk-taking vulnerability". Joyce Carol Oates seems to suggest that the poetry in *Birthday Letters* was competent but not great. She notes that Hughes' mimicry of Plath's work cannot be as original or sharp and that our eagerness for these later texts lies in

our curiosity about the poets' lives: "It's a testament to the power of what we might call contemporary biographical mania, that our interest in this capable, conventional poetry would only be stirred by our collective prurient interest in the poets' mismanaged lives." (14)

That *Birthday Letters* seems to have been written for the common reader is a point that Germaine Greer seems to raise in the *Close Up* programme. Hughes offers a version which is more accessible and therefore distinct from Plath's more "difficult" stories:

"After *Birthday Letters* he was a hero and he was a hero of a soap-opera and everybody felt that they knew him and that they could understand that relationship because they had been given the wherewithal and the assumption is that Sylvia didn't give you the wherewithal. Sylvia's utterances were too difficult. Neither is true, the truth of relationships is beyond literature."

David Baddiel, one of the critics discussing the collection during the BBC's *Whitbread Book of the Year Award* programme, suggested that its success as "a great work of art" was due to its "cross generic" quality, the fact that it "challenges the form" of poetry because it is also "part memoir, part biography, part narrative, part literary criticism." But Baddiel also expressed his desire to put an end to what Francine Stock described as a "great late twentieth century mystery": "When I read it I really wanted to read about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes afterwards. I really wanted to know what the absolute cold factual stuff was that all this impressionist thing was coming off from." *Birthday Letters* can certainly be read as a gift from its author to his readers of clandestine knowledge but as Bronfen points out, nothing can be resolved because Plath remains silent:

Each explanation is not only belated but also imperfect and partial. It can be no more and no less than an addition - a refiguration, a commentary, an attempt at clarification, with the recognition of interpretative fallibility inevitably inscribed. Even if these missives do not offer us the key to the one locked chamber in the porous vault we have constructed around the life of Sylvia Plath, they do mark a new beginning. They leave us alone with our demand and our expectation that Ted Hughes might finally account for his part in their shared story. With these segments - written in anger and reproach, offering us at times a sentimental transfiguration of the past, at times a rawly emotional rendition - he offers his last word in the case; a version which is unrelentingly concerned with his release from the spell of death.

Bronfen: 1998, pp. 27-28

Fay Weldon, Baddiel's fellow critic in this programme, clearly wanted to distance herself from this kind of voyeurism and noted that the personal and private revelations in Hughes'

collection of letters, rather than causing a revisionist response among feminists, has further stirred some of the anger. Weldon, to a certain degree, echoes my own response: "I resist this exploration of the soul ... there is a sort of torment and torturedness that I don't want to know. It's his, not ours." In *Close Up* Blake Morrison expressed the sentiment that despite the range of Hughes' knowledge it was a "great pity" that what people wanted to hear from him was this kind of detail about his marriage.

I welcomed Hughes' collection because it seemed to open up a new area for investigation which I hoped would be of benefit to Plath scholars. Erica Wagner, for example, has published a new critical work *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the Story of Birthday Letters* (2000) which links the biographical details of the couple's lives to the imagery in their poetry. I was also curious to discover Hughes' version and expression of certain events into which we have already been given insight, through the largely posthumous publications of Plath's diary, letters, autobiography, poetry and fiction. I wondered how, or if, this new voice would alter our perceptions of Plath's originals: what could I learn from Hughes about Plath's texts and writing practices? However, rather than compare and contrast biographical versions of the details of their lives I was keen to discover whether it would be possible to read a kind of dialogue across the texts of Plath and Hughes. I was interested to see the *The Times'* presentation of this new work alongside the blatantly biased details from Plath's life. Would this kind of negative slant on Plath also be found within the Hughes collection? What became clear very early on was that alongside Hughes' reclamation of "a narrative about his life that has been wrested from him" (Diane Middlebrook, *The Times*, 19.1.98), the media, perhaps more so than Hughes, was trying "to regain control" in order to benefit its marketing strategies.

Let me dip briefly into an analysis of this recent representation of Plath. On the front page of *The Times* (17.1.98), beneath a recent photograph of Hughes, we have the caption.

"Hughes: targeted by critics" and beneath a bleary photograph of Plath: "Plath: gassed herself in 1963." We read about the "intense suspicion" and "hostility" directed towards Hughes "bruised by abuse", who arguably was "the patient husband of an impossible wife," and note these juxtaposing and questionable oppositions: "one English countryman, one *exotic* foreigner; one complex European; one *simple girl* from Massachusetts" (my emphasis) (14).

In Wagner's front page report Hughes' "critical and commercial success" is further juxtaposed with Plath's suicide whereafter she becomes "a frozen icon of betrayed womanhood," and although Wagner writes here that "feminism and political correctness have erected what Motion describes today as "'a high wall' around Plath," she reports that Hughes himself had told Stevenson "that he wished to surround himself, his late wife and his children with 'a wall of astral fire' and preserve, in complete privacy, his own thoughts and feelings about Sylvia Plath." The "simple girl" in this article (walled in, it seems, by all parties) is described as a "remarkable artist," whose "vibrancy" was "arresting," and whose "own divided voice, cheerful in the letters she wrote to her mother, so often despairing in her journal, has made her an elusive spirit." The final words selected for the opening front page report are those from the voice in Plath's "Lady Lazarus": "[R]eaders will be able for the first time to confront Hughes's account of the contradictions that others have found in their lives and the still-controversial death of the women who wrote: 'Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well.'"

It seems that whilst Motion may be correct in his assertion that "[T]here's no sense of score-setting or wrong-righting" in Hughes' publication of *Birthday Letters*, Wagner, like Stevenson, is constantly at pains to do so with regard to the assumption that it was her shocking suicide which opened the gates to fame. Germaine Greer suggests, in her contribution to the *Close Up* programme, that Plath's suicide was an act which wreaked a life-long assault on Hughes: "She got what she wanted - I mean her shadow lay across his

life." Greer regrets her readiness to blame Hughes for Plath's death and explains that feminists, having lost an icon, a "heroine", needed to find a culprit. For Greer, despite the evidence of Plath's genius in the later works wherein "the terrible imagistic clarity grows and grows and grows," the effect of Plath's suicide has implications with regard to her reading of the text: "you cannot deny the fact that you're in the presence of a major poet but a suicide note is not a major work and that's what we got." I found this reading of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* by one of our leading feminist theorists disturbing.

Craig Brown, one of the critics discussing *Birthday Letters* in the *Whitbread Book Awards* not only notes Hughes' anger in this collection but also his insistence on animal muses and Hughes' implied suggestion that it was poetry which pushed Plath towards her death, a reading of Hughes' intentions in these texts which I would endorse: "Certainly he thinks that with Sylvia Plath she was pushed by her muse into suicide, that if she hadn't written poems you get the feeling she wouldn't have killed herself" (16). There is always a sense that Hughes seems to present himself as a helpless bystander who is at first an impotent rival in the face of Plath's dead father, and secondly an inadequate protector and an unwitting spectator in the face of Plath's death-drive:

*Birthday Letters* asks, therefore, to be read not only as a commemoration of Sylvia Plath but perhaps more crucially as the work of Ted Hughes's mourning. By transforming the contingency of death into a coherent narrative about their passionate meeting, their tempestuous marriage, as well as his inability to ease her obsession with her father and with writing until these two enmeshed death forces ultimately came to consume her, he can finally set the furies that have haunted him since her demise at rest. [...] The image of Sylvia Plath that emerges in these *Birthday Letters* is, then, of one who is being eaten alive by the dangerous fiction she has created in relation to her mother and father, while he is nothing but a protective shield between the woman he loves and the dead father to whom she is so fatally drawn.

Bronfen: 1998, p.24.

Bronfen's analysis of Hughes' collection as an "apostrophe to the deceased" certainly echoes my own response to Hughes' revisiting and retelling of Plath's poetic narratives:

Conceived as an apostrophe to the deceased, whom he evokes so that her presence might serve as a source for his poetic inspiration, *Birthday Letters* is written in the second-person present. Hughes speaks to Sylvia Plath as though she were still alive, as though they were looking back on their shared past together. Manipulating the structure of direct address in a fictionalized way so as to allow for the



impossible - the resurrection in fantasy of someone dead - he promises to give account of a particularly painful and haunting chapter of his life. However, if in the course of this rhetorical gesture, as Barbara Johnson notes, 'the absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic', one must not forget that apostrophe 'is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.' (20) Indeed, the reanimation inherent in this rhetorical mode allows Hughes to appropriate Plath's silence [...] so as to legitimize his version of their shared life. It is as if, having her present again, he can use this digression from straight speech finally to tell his version of what happened. In her function as muse - thus the strange logic of apostrophe - Sylvia Plath calls forth vignettes from their daily life which allow him to give voice to his anguish and sorrow over her death, but also his sense of having been betrayed, because he was struck by her violent fury, and drawn with her into death's force field.

Bronfen: 1998, pp. 23-24.

I would suggest that clues towards an alternative explanation for the breakdown of their relationship could be drawn from the interview *Poets in Partnership* (BBC Radio 1961), an extract of which is played for us earlier in the *Close Up on Ted Hughes*, before the move from Primrose Hill. Whilst Hughes speaks about the couples' similarities, their shared "tempo" and "rhythm," Plath tells quite a different story in answer to the interviewer's prompt:

INT - You wouldn't like to give the impression though that you spend the whole of your married life thinking up poems and reading them to each other?

SP - Well, I think our married life is practically indistinguishable from all the people who live around us. The only main difference is that Ted doesn't go out to work at nine, come home at five. He retires about nine to his room and works but I certainly have a life just like all the other housewives and mothers in our district - shopping, dishes, taking care of the baby and so forth. (Laugh) I think very few people have an idea that I do anything at all except household chores and so on. (16)

Despite this questionable arrangement which must have frustrated and hindered Plath's writing, she managed to bring out her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus*, in 1960 when Hughes was publishing his second.

What I also find questionable and somewhat disappointing is that Greer defends Hughes further, justifying his affair and flight of Plath and her babies, by seeming to level criticism at Plath for her rejection of this "humdrum" existence:

"I think that she was probably crazy happy for some parts of that marriage but what she couldn't bear was for it to become humdrum and ordinary. She had to be provoking intensities all the time and I really think that Ted had to run for his life. He was in deep trouble there."

Now let's look at Wagner's selective and subjective introductions to Hughes' poems in *The Times'* series of early publications alongside some readings of poems by Plath and Hughes

which seem to create a kind of dialogue we have not met before. Beneath the title of the poem "St Botolph's," in which Hughes narrates his first meeting and passionate embrace with Plath in February 1956, is the emboldened and enlarged headline "**Bite left tooth-marks on his cheek.**" This event is of course notorious in terms of previous censorship for, as Rose points out, the immediate forerunning and following passages to the narration of this event by Plath in her diary (clearly a very drunken affair), which also indicates Hughes' violent passion, were omitted from the *Journals* in 1982. They do, however, appear in Rose's book and here, in part, in Wagner's introduction:

I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth [and ripped my hair band off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered sun and much love, and whose like I shall never find again and my favorite 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. [His poem 'I did it, I.' Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words: his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders.] And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing fighting to you.

(In parentheses Rose's completed version from Nancy Milford's original review before editing)

Rose: 1991, p. 121.

Wagner omits the area I have underlined and the whole of the passage following "blood was running down his face." It seems that in promoting Hughes' work the emphasis in the media is being directed towards the figure of Plath, both as an object of investigation and the subject/content of the poetry. This might serve to steer us away from the author, who is also a subject here. Hughes' poem "St Botolph's" ends with the following lines and if we look at the pronouns in this section there are twice as many which refer to Hughes:

You meant to knock *me* out  
With *your* vivacity. I remember  
Little from the rest of that evening.  
I slid away with *my* girl-friend. Nothing  
Except her hissing rage in a doorway  
And *my* stupefied interrogation  
Of *your* blue headscarf from *my* pocket  
And the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks  
That was to brand *my* face for the next month.  
The *me* beneath it for good.  
(my emphasis)

In the *Close Up* programme, Greer lays some of the responsibility for Hughes' victimisation on his foolhardy response to this first encounter:

"I think that Hughes went like a lamb to the slaughter, that when she bit him at that party - it was such a stagey thing to do [shaking her head]- and that men with more common sense it wouldn't have worked, they would have said 'Oh God, get this dame off me' but she assessed his response. He couldn't get over it."

Although Wagner tells us that we learn from Plath's journal that "she was determined to meet 'that big, dark, hunky boy'" what precedes and follows this entry selectively quoted seems to show some ambivalence, not reported here, in Plath's attitude to Hughes, who she only knew at this time through reading his poetry:

Then the worst thing happened, that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes. [...]

And now I sit here, demure and tired in brown, slightly sick at heart. I shall go on. I shall write a detailed description of shock treatment, tight, blasting short descriptions with not one smudge of coy sentimentality [...]

I shall never see him again, and the thorny limitations of the day crowd in like the spikes on the gates at Queens last night: I could never sleep with him anyway, with all his friends here and his close relation to them. laughing, talking, I should be the world's whore, as well as Roget's strumpet. I shall never see him, he will never look for me. He said my name, Sylvia, and banded a black grinning look into my eyes, and I would like to try just this once, my force against his. But he will never come [...]

*Journals*: 1982, pp.112-113.

It is clear that Plath wishes not only to preserve her dignity and reputation but also that she is determined to keep her creative writing in tact. Anne Stevenson's comment in *Close Up* that Plath "was absolutely determined to be a writer and to find a mate" seems to corroborate Plath's voice-over in the programme when she explains that she had read Ted's poetry, was "very impressed and wanted to meet him." A reading of Hughes' poem "Trophies," however, might also redress the balance in terms of the narration of seductive power. Here Hughes "borrows" Plath's image of the panther which appears in her poem "Pursuit" and questions her early attempt at attributing to him a mythical, anthropomorphical power with the opening words "The panther?" Hughes answers with his own familiar theme of animal-spirit possession thus undermining her insistent imagery which appears in both her poetry and journal as we shall see. She is the one who is metamorphosised "So it sprang over you," and he is numbed

by the "shock attack" into a "drunken euphoria". Yet despite this, the title of the poem and the final lines of the last stanza throw some ambiguity over this shift of responsibility: "As it carried me off I detached / The hairband carefully from between its teeth / And a ring from its ear, for my trophies" (Birthday Letters: 1998, pp. 18-19).

"Pursuit" was written after Plath's first encounter with Hughes. In her journal (27 February, 1956) Plath explains that the poem "Pursuit" is not only dedicated to Hughes but also that it is "about the dark forces of lust" (*Journals*: 1982, p.116). Plath sent this poem to her mother (March 9, 1956) asking her to read it aloud so that she could get the full effect of its hypnotic quality and the "simple, seductive beauty of the words." Written after Blake, she explains what she considers its power as a "metaphysical" poem: "It is, of course, a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love, which is a part of it." She writes that an alternative epigraph to that from Racine's *Phedre* ("Dans le fond des forets votre image me suit") could have come from Yeats: " 'Whatever flames upon the night, Man's own resinous heart has fed.' The painter's brush consumes his dreams and all that" (*Letters*: 1978, pp. 222-223).

This poem gives us an insight into the beginnings of what will be a significant thematic and metaphorical exploration of her relationship in terms of animals and hunting imagery. The opening lines herald a theme which Plath was to reiterate in her later poem "The Rabbit Catcher"; the relationship between sex and death: "There is a panther stalks me down: / One day I'll have my death of him." The speaker of the poem is at once prey "The hunt is on, and sprung the trap" but also an equal "The black marauder, hauled by love / On fluent haunches, keeps my speed", the implication here is that the hunter has to keep up. Whilst there is a sense of flight "His ardor snares me, lights the trees, / And I run flaring in my skin" the over-riding emotion seems to be excitement rather than fear. Whilst the panther "Compels a total

sacrifice" the speaker's response indicates a willingness to succumb which is not expressed in terms of passivity: "I hurl my heart to halt his pace, / To quench his thirst I squander blood." The verb "hurl" is strong and active indicating that there is no loss of agency but a reciprocal response. The hunter must slow down to catch the heart. The last two lines suggest that the prey is waiting in excited anticipation "The panther's tread is on the stairs, / Coming up and up the stairs." Whilst the door has been bolted it is not to keep him out but to keep out "that dark guilt" (*Collected Poems*: 1981, pp. 22-23). Desire and repulsion are juxtaposed throughout this poem and this creates a tension where violence becomes intensely erotic.

"18 Rugby Street" which narrates the couple's first sexual encounter when Plath visited Hughes in London also appeared in *The Times*. In her introduction to this poem, headlined **Scar from the past warned: stay clear**, Wagner includes a line from an earlier entry in Plath's *Journal*, March 10, 1956; "a huge joy galloped through me", as Plath's reaction to the news that Hughes had returned to Cambridge. What Wagner omits is again of interest to Plath scholars. Plath's desire for "my black marauder" or "the panther" (*Journals*: 1982, p.131) is juxtaposed in the Journal entry with her "fear of being crushed in a huge dark machine" (*Journals*: 1982, p.132). We can see that Hughes had already become part of her writing. Plath uses metaphor and vivid imagery to describe her feelings and thoughts about him and his effect upon her:

*March 11. Sunday morning.* Another day of hell. He is on the prowl, all the fiends are come to torment me: and I alone am escaped to tell thee [...] they will not come. Not in the gray sober light of morning. They will not come.

But last night they came, at two in the morning, Phillippa said. Throwing mud on her window, saying my name, the two mixed: mud and my name; my name is mud. She came to look for me, but I was sleeping. Dreaming of being home in Winthrop on a lovely new spring day, walking in pajamas down the streets of melting tar to the sea, the salt freshness, and squatting in the sea in a tangle of green weeds were clam-diggers with osier baskets, rising, one after the other, to look at me in my pajamas, and I hid in spring shame in the trellised arbors of the Days' home.  
[...]

And all this while, those boys in the dark were treating me like that whore, coming like the soldiers to Blanche DuBois and rolling in the gardens, drunk, and mixing her name with mud. Two reports today, to insert more needles in my skin. I must cram for my paper. Oh, god give me the guts to live through this week. Let me some day confront him, to make him human, and not that black panther which struts on the forest fringes of hearsay. Such hell. They refuse to face me in the daylight. I am

not worth that. I must be, when, if ever they come. They will not come. I don't want to eat, to go to tea today. I want to rave out in the streets and confront that big panther, to make the daylight whittle him to lifesize.

*Journals*: 1982, pp.133-134.

I was interested to read Hughes' poem "Visit," not because it gives us his version of the event which "is only a story" but because it gives us an interesting insight into the privacy of Plath's journal writing. Hughes again abdicates responsibility for this pursuit; he was drunk when he threw mud at the window, he was somehow "being auditioned/ For the male lead in your drama," manipulated "As if a puppet were being tried on its strings," he is being experimented on like "dead frog's legs", jiggling unwillingly "through those gestures". But more significant than this listing of metaphorical excuses is Hughes' explanation of the experience and effect of reading the account of Plath's feelings ten years after her death. Clearly what she had expressed in her journal she had hidden from her husband and kept to herself.

Hughes refers to a scar on Plath's cheek, a remnant to her suicide attempt at twenty, fictionalised graphically in *The Bell Jar*, in two of the poems published in *The Times*, thus justifying Wagner's headline. The first reference appears in the first poem published, "Fulbright Scholars", where Hughes recalls looking at a photograph of the new intake from America, the words "doubt", "maybe", "unlikely" seem to undermine his attraction and draw attention to the more emphatic last sentence here:

No doubt I scanned particularly  
The girls. Maybe I noticed you.  
Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.  
Noted your long hair, loose waves -  
Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.  
*Birthday Letters*: 1998, p.3.

Hughes' second reference to Plath's scar appears in "18 Rugby Street." Here Hughes' attraction does not seem to be in question even if his common sense is. I quote from *Birthday Letters* as Wagner's omissions make the warning "stay clear" the central focus.

It was never a face in itself. Never the same.  
 It was like the sea's face - a stage  
 For weathers and currents, the sun's play and the moon's.  
 Never a face until that final morning  
 When it became the face of a child - its scar  
 Like a Maker's flaw. But now you declaimed  
 A long poem about a black panther  
 While I held you and kissed you and tried to keep you  
 From flying about the room. For all that,  
 You would not stay.  
 ...

In the roar of soul your scar told me -  
 Like its secret name, or its password -  
 How you tried to kill yourself. And I heard  
 Without ceasing for a moment to kiss you  
 As if a sober star had whispered it  
 Above the revolving, rumbling city: stay clear.

A poltroon of a star. I cannot remember  
 How I smuggled myself, wrapped in you,  
 Into the hotel. There we were.  
 You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish.  
 You were a new world. My new world.  
 So this is America, I marvelled.  
 Beautiful, beautiful, America!  
*Birthday Letters*: 1998, pp.20-24.

The suggestion that Plath's lack of Englishness might be a problem to Hughes seems strange here. Also strange is Myers' claim that "Ted was a little embarrassed by the flattering poems she wrote about him" (Stevenson: 1989, p.314) when what we are perhaps hearing here is a voice which is trying to convey the memory of a man "overwhelmed", "obsessed, stricken and deeply loving" (Motion, *Times* 17.1.98). An extract from an interview with Plath in *Close Up* explains that the relationship grew out of the fact that they were both spending time writing together and both writing poems to one another.

The *Close Up* programme describes Plath's poet-apprenticeship to Hughes during their life in the Primrose Hill area of London. The commentary also suggests that Hughes' tutelage which put Sylvia in touch with her "poetic self" and "demons" was a dangerous and "high risk enterprise." Alvarez explains: Ted "the dominant figure" gave Plath "the keys to the cellar door and she went down there, and down she went. What was in the cellar turned out to be nightmare." The programme suggests that Plath's former practice of dramatising her own life

stories and "emotional trauma" in her writing now became a more intense project as she began to find her poetic voice. By the time the couple move to Devon it is assumed that the reason for the breakdown of their the relationship is directly related to Plath's writing practice: "the psychic drama being played out in Sylvia's poetry was assuming a darker edge, engulfing her husband and describing their marriage in the past tense." The reference given is taken from the last stanza of Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher" (1962): "And we, too, had a relationship - / Tight wires between us, / Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring / Sliding shut on some quick thing, / The constriction killing me also" (*Collected Poems*: 1981, p. 194).

Jacqueline Rose tells us that Plath's "Rabbit Catcher" is "the poem in which the weight of biographical reference on poetic interpretation operates with the greatest force" (Rose: 1991 135) (18). This poem is omitted from the first publication of *Ariel* which seems to corroborate critical readings which insist that the poem is a metaphor for the Plath / Hughes relationship. The poem opens with a list of verbs which create an image of nature's hostility and violence towards the speaker: "It was a place of force -- / The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair, / Tearing off my voice, and the sea / Blinding me with its lights." Suffocation, silencing and blinding would seem to indicate that the speaker is powerless, but in the second stanza the speaker regains agency: "I tasted the malignity of the gorse, / Its black spikes, / The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers." The spikes and the flowers are efficient, beautiful and "extravagant like torture." The religious imagery here wrought from the word "unction" (a ceremony where one is anointed with oil) is at once suggestive of death and also brings in a soothing tone which is undone by the word "torture". The hollow where the snares are laid is "Simmering, perfumed", and, as Rose suggests, this place seems to be a metaphor for the female body (Rose: 1991, p. 138-139). It is at once an attractive symbol of femininity, but also a trap.

Similar to the excitement of waiting in "Pursuit" we have another image of the hunter and



the orgasmic death of the prey in the penultimate stanza of "The Rabbit Catcher": "How they awaited him, those little deaths! / They waited like sweethearts. They excited him." The sexual connotations here are unavoidable when we read the last stanza which immediately moves to a "relationship". The "Sliding", shutting and "constriction" also kills the speaker. We could read the "also" as referring to the rabbits or the hunter (19).

The recurrence of hunting and snaring images in Plath's "Rabbit Catcher" offer us an inroad which I believe is disturbingly relevant with regard to other recent media publications about Plath's person which seem to inform readings of her work. Hughes' poem of the same title seems to go some way towards digging up some ground we have already covered regarding Plath's lack of Englishness and the couple's cultural and geographical differences. The implication wrought from reading Hughes' poem is that he has read Plath's poem as an expression of distaste for the figure who traps small animals and is "excited" by the "little deaths." Perhaps the poem is a harsh criticism of Hughes, given his childhood pastime (which is well documented in *Close Up*) and the speaker's direct address to this past relationship. Hughes' almost direct reference to Plath's "blunt" fingers "Ringing the white china" suggests that he wishes to release this figure from her scorn. The first part of Hughes' poem gives the reader an introductory narrative to the event which perhaps inspired Plath's poem. Sylvia was angry, he did not know what he had done wrong, she "hurled" the children into the car and he jumped in because he suspected she would "do something crazy." They could not find a road to the sea and she was further infuriated by "our English private greed/ Of fencing off all coastal approaches." Then "despised England's grubby edges when you got there." He found a snare and she "tore it up". Here, then, is his answer to her criticism and his justification of the practice she so despised:

I was aghast. Faithful  
To my country gods - I saw  
The sanctity of a trapline desecrated.

You saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles,  
Clamped around a blue mug. I saw  
Country poverty raising a penny,  
Filling a Sunday stewpot. You saw baby-eyed  
Strangled innocents, I saw sacred  
Ancient custom  
*Birthday Letters*: 1998, p. 145.

The juxtaposition throughout this section of the poem of the "I saw" / "you saw" certainly highlights the couples' differing perceptions but Hughes further explains that his lack of understanding was related to the fact that his wife's rage was not an empathetic response to the rabbits but indicative of something far more sinister: "You were weeping with a rage / That cared nothing for rabbits. You were locked / Into some chamber gasping for oxygen / Where I could not find you, or really hear you, / Let alone understand you." This gratuitous reference to the gas chamber echoes the imagery of Plath's final poetry but also forms a biographical link to her death. Not only does this seem an irrelevant and inadequate response to Plath's "Rabbit Catcher", but also it endorses and substantiates that common impulse and appropriation we have encountered in the media to offer misreadings of her work. Hughes' final lines continue to borrow vocabulary and imagery from Plath's original but it is both something in himself and Plath's poems which are snared: "In those snares / You'd caught something. / Had you caught something in me, / Nocturnal and unknown to me? Or was it / Your doomed self, Your tortured, crying, / Suffocating self? Whichever, / Those terrible, hypersensitive / Fingers of your verse closed around it and / Felt it alive. The poems, like smoking entrails, / Came soft into your hands." There is no doubt that Hughes perceives of himself as a victim and that he expresses this through an appropriation of Plath's texts. (21)

Hughes' accusation that Plath's "rage" was divorced from her distaste of killing animals seems to be a contradiction to his story in a recent article which appeared in the *Guardian Saturday Review* (9.1.1999), a previously unpublished interview given to Thomas Pero for a US angling magazine. The article appears on the front page of the Review section with the

title "Poet, pike and a pitiful grouse," a large colour photograph of Hughes holding a huge fish and a sub-heading intended to hook any doubters "he talks about Sylvia Plath and his obsessions with fishing and hunting". A secondary bait to this part of the article is provided by the enlarged inset of part of a quotation from the interview: "The day before I got married the first time, I hooked a pike in my dream. As it came up its girth filled the entire lake." No analysis of the meaning of this dream is given, only an explanation that his obsessive dreams about catching pike in a particular lake always reflected his current state of mind. The "pitiful grouse" of the title, more significantly, refers to the central narrative of the report and an event which involved Plath. On a visit to Wuthering Heights the couple came across an injured grouse and Hughes killed it; "And she went berserk." Hughes further explains that Plath had some mythical connection with that particular species and that the effect on him of her reaction (expressed in somewhat exploitative language) was to change his hunting habits forever (almost):

"So, I'd not only killed this helpless thing in front of her, I'd killed the legendary bird. As she went berserk, I felt it go through me like an electric shock. A total transference to me of her feeling. I realized I didn't want to kill any bird or animal ever again."

Despite the narration of this relinquishment Hughes gives an elaborate defence of his reason for hunting: "I always used to be aware of everything when I was shooting ... You were intensely alert to the whole landscape and the life in the landscape. I'd glance out of the window and I'd immediately see the ears of hares sticking out of the corn." Later in this interview Hughes narrates a day when he succumbed and did go hunting, a day when he found again a lost "paradise" of which he was now deprived, when he realised that only hunting gave him a connection to "the whole".

Valentine Cunningham's article "For Better or Verse?", published in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (27.11.1998), notes the couple's differences and their distinction as poets. He admits that his claim for Hughes' poetic superiority might be due to his having

thirty-five years more practice. There is no doubt that Plath's last work gives evidence of a separation from Hughes' influence, a brilliance, distinction and genius which would have been a contending voice in the bid for honours. However, Cunningham goes on to substantiate his weighing of merit by claiming that Hughes' work will survive because he deals in myth and she only in fantasy. She is only a "displaced American tourist in her bobby sox" with no real experience of suffering, whereas Hughes' father really was a survivor of Gallipoli. Plath's "mere fantasies" of Dachau are less worthy because they are reflections of "an epoch's brutalisms" only perceived "through the windows of a tourist bus," whereas Hughes' transcendent poetry "as old and 'as deep as England'" offers "a kind of prophetic vision of an ancient English selfhood." Unfortunately, Cunningham's final statement that "Plath will be turned to more and more as a case, while Hughes will be read as a poet" seems already, in some part, to be a truth but I would deny the claim that the reason for this is that Plath's fantasy provokes to a lesser degree the imagination than Hughes' myth.

Cunningham's article does suggest that Hughes' publication of *Birthday Letters* is not only read as a "striving to have the last word" but also as a volume whose poems are "enlivened" by Plath's death in the face of his own. Whilst the book's success cannot be argued and tributes and honours for the late poet laureate are not for me to question, I cannot help but question the integrity of a text which takes for its subject Plath's life whilst constantly exploiting the undercurrent of her death. Whilst David Baddiel sees this "infusion" of the "knowledge of her death" throughout the poetry as a creation of "a new tense" and a "complex use of time," my response is that this is a perpetuation and an exploitation of the myth which has grown around Plath's life and work. I would argue that this is not a biography. I cannot engage in Hughes' representation of his wife. As Blake Morrison tells us in *Close Up* Hughes "tells us about himself" in this collection. Nor is this literary criticism; Hughes' readings of Plath's work are pathological and infused with the need for public justification and exoneration; he has

recognised himself in her stories and by saying "I" he seems to believe that he can change her version by giving his own. I remain sceptical.

That Plath's texts are alive and open to multiple interpretation marks her genius as a writer. Hughes' exorcism, his psychological liberation, may have been wrought through exercising the art of saying "I" but my earlier hope of reading a dialogue across the poems of both Plath and Hughes has, in part, been thwarted. Clearly there are interesting reverberations and echoes in Hughes' collection which bring us back to Plath's texts, but the conversation is unavoidably one way. In this sense Hughes' poems can only be read as rhetorical, since Plath could not reciprocate. I believe that Plath remains an important writer for feminist scholars because, as we have seen, her project was to find expression for the experience of living a woman's life. She was able to voice female subjectivity both in terms of a transcendence of the feminine body and in terms of a relational self which inhabits the material body in the real world.

## Notes

(1) See David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (1976). London: The Athlone Press, p. 277.

(2) Tripp concludes:

One of the effects of a concentration on the surfaces of the text and the resistances found there is to open up Plath's texts to the possibility of new feminist readings which treat the poems as challenging the subject positions allotted to women by a patriarchal culture.

*Women: a cultural review*. Vol. 5 No. 3, O.U.P.:1994.

(3) Elizabeth Bronfen points out that: "Plath's adamant rejection of an exclusively self-absorbed narcissism as the source of poetic expression highlights the importance she placed on control in the process of converting experience into poetry" (Bronfen: 1998, p.62). Her self-discipline, as far as poetic technique was concerned, was reflected by the emphasis Plath put on the vocal quality of her work. She evoked a sense of her own presence through saying them aloud, listening to her own voice and measuring the tone. In an interview with Peter Orr (30th October, 1962) Plath explained the importance of this voicing of her later poems: "I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud." *The Poet Speaks* (1966), Orr. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul) in Bronfen: 1998, p170.

(4) Bronfen notes that "Poem for a Birthday" was "initially conceived as a deliberate Theodore Roethke pastiche," and that it "came to mark the significant turning point in the development of Plath's poetic voice" (Bronfen: 1998, p.86).

(5) Rose's detailed analysis of "Poem for a Birthday" is very useful in terms of a Kristevan reading and in relation to theme of madness ( Rose: 1991, pp. 40-63).

(6) See Patricia Waugh *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (1992), pp. 133-135.

(7) Bronfen refers here to Lacan's "Intervention on Transference" (1951) in Berheimer and Kahane's *In Dora's Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism* (1985). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp.92-104.

(8) Bronfen's comments on Plath's cultural performativity are helpful here:

Plath's move into popular fiction brings with it a shift in tone from the highly self-conscious prosody of the early poems and the violence and rage of the *Ariel* poems, to a narrative voice marked by self-irony, able to describe the pathos of cultural dislocation, the horror of self-consuming madness, even while at the same time stepping away from this overflow of destructive feeling. By virtue of humour Plath comes to perfect the cultural performativity she had experimented with in her earlier prose writings, with parody emerging as the narrative strategy that allows her to dismantle the very discursive formations whose regulative law she also finds herself unable to abandon fully, by simultaneously celebrating the artificiality of fantasies of health and happiness and pointing to the horror beneath the perfect surface.

Bronfen: 1998, p.113.

(9) Bronfen quotes from *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (1994). William Scammell (ed)

New York: Picador, p.480.

- (10) For an intelligent, extended analysis see Bronfen: 1998, p.104.
- (11) See Bronfen: 1998, pp.105-106.
- (12) My own reaction to *The Journals* (2000) has surprised me, much of my research on Plath for this thesis was undertaken before its publication and, whilst the text has become a treasure on the bookcase, I have not feverishly sought out those missing extracts now available. Perhaps this is because Plath has never been a silent woman for me; her voice has been clearly heard in my reading of her texts for the past decade. I have been interested to see an attempt in the media to convince us that we can uncover the true self of Plath through her so-called private jottings but her multiple self-representations in this collection are no more or less interesting than those selves which make their appearance in her poems and fiction.
- (13) A reference to Janet Malcolm's biography *The Silent Woman* (1994) which explores and analyses the "Plath / Hughes' industry."
- (14) Sarah Lyall 'A Divided Response of Hughes' Poems', *New York Times*, Arts Page, 17 January 1998, p7.
- (15) This echoes the criticism found in *Bitter Fame*, in an Appendix offered by Lucas Myers, a friend of Hughes from Cambridge, who argues that his forebodings about the marriage lay within his perception that Plath was too different from her husband. He had expected that he would marry someone "highly intelligent but close to nature, a daughter of the English countryside" (Myers in Stevenson: 1989, p. 314-315).
- (16) See also Lucas Myers, Appendix 1 in Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*: "Sylvia ... had acquired the technical mastery to write lasting poems, but the fuel at her disposal to propel poems into being was the same substance that provoked her suicide. At cost to herself and her survivors, she doubtlessly attained what she wanted most from life, a permanent place in the history of twentieth-century poetry in English" (Myers in Stevenson: 1989, p321).
- (17) For a fictionalisation of Plath's existence at this time as new mother and "model secretary" see Ellen in "The Day of Success," *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* London: Faber & Faber, 1979, pp 185 - 198.
- (18) For an intelligent feminist reading of "The Rabbit Catcher" see Rose's analysis in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991), pp. 135 - 143.
- (19) Perloff reads this poem alongside Lawrence's "Love on the Farm" (1908) in Linda Wagner's *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* but argues that there is no indication of sexual arousal in Plath's poem (pp. 109-123). Like Rose, I do not agree with this reading. Plath's "I felt hands", "ringing", and "little deaths" is reminiscent of the ending Lawrence's poem: "With his hand he turns my face to him / And caresses me with his fingers that still smell grim / Of the rabbit's fur! God, I am caught in a snare! / I know not what fine wire is round my throat; / I only know I let him finger there / My pulse of life, and let him nose like a stoat / Who sniffs with joy before he drinks the blood. [...] and a flood / Of sweet

fire sweeps across me, so I drown / Against him, die, and find death good."  
D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems* Vol.1 (1964). London: Heinemann.

(20) Bronfen's comments here about the effects of borrowing from Plath are particularly salient:

if apostrophe allows the poet to ventriloquize the absent addressee, his own poetic voice seems to be infected by the exchange as well. While the dead beloved, functioning as muse for the poetic utterances of a mourning love is a literary topos well known to us [...] the unusual turn Ted Hughes gives this poetic convention is that he explicitly refers to the texts written by the dead woman. He casts himself as one who has been both consumed by her death and the furies that have haunted him since, and also infected by her texts. [...] Indeed, in the course of his poetic narrative he articulates how her reformulation of shared experiences in her journal entries or poems not only diverged from his perception at the time but in hindsight also allowed him to recognize what at the time he had missed or misunderstood, notably her psychic anguish, torture and the inherited traumatic knowledge that cryptonymically came to haunt her. While he openly admits that he came to see the world anew through her eyes, he also insists that - in part owing to their cultural difference, in part owing to her parental debt - he often could not share her fated vision of place and events. Yet part of his appropriation of the deceased not only involves commenting on her journal entries but also imitating her poetic voice. In doing so, he does not only undo temporality, speaking as she did in the past. Rather, he uses ventriloquism to offer his version of poems, such as 'Daddy', 'Ariel', or the 'Rabbit Catcher', the bone of so much critical attention. One could surmise that, much as he sought to control the Plath Estate, and with it the memory and reputation of his dead wife, with these poetic refigurations of scenes from the poems and journals he also seeks to control the correct interpretation of her texts. But - and herein lies the paradox of the elegiac apostrophic mode - the voice of the survivor is never more than a supplement. Even if it seeks to supersede the deceased, it feeds off its host, and lives only in relation to the texts that have gone before it.  
Bronfen: 1998, pp.26-27.

(21) Bronfen refers to Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', in Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.185



## **Postmodern Bodies and Conclusion**

## **Subjectivity, Feminism and Postmodern Theory**

The questions of materiality and relationality remain central to my exploration of the female body, women and madness. At this point I would like to investigate the chasm which has opened up between postmodern and feminist theory as it relates closely to our discussions of representations of the body and subjectivity in women's literature. Postmodernism's repudiation of the Enlightenment projects of developing science, universal morality and law, and a belief in the autonomy of art, are now seemingly unrealisable partly because there is no longer any discretion in these areas. The boundaries between art and science are increasingly diffuse (1). Feminist sceptics would question the political consequences of such abandonment whilst embracing the notion that "universal" truths and objectivity are obsolete. After all, the universal rational subject is still male and all knowledge is wrought from interested parties.

Patricia Waugh's essay "Postmodernism and Feminism" (1998) raises the question as to whether postmodern theory is emancipatory and draws attention to the uneasy relationship between postmodernism and feminism. Waugh invites us to consider more critically recent feminist theory which embraces a kind of postmodern "sublime" wherein the "otherness" of female space (which exists outside of rationality), portrayed through images of fluidity, hybridity and the cyborg, is seen as desirable. Recognising the positive shift of such thought which has released the bounds between gender and anatomy, Waugh also signals a crisis in terms of knowledge and identity which has implications for women. Women need to develop a "new ethics" in response to postmodern technological changes and the shifting relationship between knowledge and power (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, pp. 178-180). We may have much to lose in terms of political agency and we must protect and preserve the newly emerged female subject by means of a modification, rather than abandonment, of Enlightenment notions of reason, justice, autonomy and human progress. Like Bordo, Waugh

rejects the nihilistic and disembodied "view from everywhere" (Bordo: 1993, p. 133).

Throughout this thesis I have been concerned to consider women who are situated in a particular place in terms of their domestic and artistic lives in order to uncover their feminist responses to the female condition. In this sense, although we have explored notions of transcendence, the embodied self viewed from a specific 'somewhere' has been perhaps more pertinent to my own feminist project.

Waugh makes a distinction between what she terms "strong" and "weak" postmodern theory, these distinctions relate to postmodernism as a critique of knowledge as formulated by Enlightenment theory, and postmodernism as aesthetic practice. She also sees within these two distinctions a further generic difference between "deconstructive" postmodernism, a critique and abandonment of Enlightenment thinking, and "reconstructive" postmodernism which imagines alternative futures, transformations or breaks with modernity. Waugh's terms and theory can offer a useful insight into the relationship between feminism and postmodernism and an exploration of such a breakdown, she suggests, may lead to a discovery:

that a particular form of the postmodern which has been productive for feminism in the aesthetic sphere may be problematic for feminist critiques of knowledge and for feminist politics. This suggests, contrary to globalising accounts of the postmodern condition, that feminism is free to take a strategic stance on postmodernism, selecting those aspects which might be useful to a particular goal at a particular time.

Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p. 182.

Certainly my own readings of literary texts which have aestheticised the female condition have been largely informed by feminist polemical writing which has taken a more realist approach, for example the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer.

Waugh explains that "strong deconstructive postmodernism" can be traced back to Nietzsche's declaration in *Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (1872) that all knowledge is perspectival. There is no metanarrative or universal truth on which we can ground knowledge or ethics because human perspectives are endlessly different. This kind of

postmodernism tends to emphasise the importance of performance and rhetoric and makes room for "little narratives" which can reflect the desires of different, particular and marginal groups. Although grand narratives are exposed and rejected there is a resultant problem in that the feminist project is also seen as yet another little story. "Strong reconstructive postmodernism" differs from the above only in that it envisages or "produces a number of 'aestheticised' and sometimes utopian accounts of knowledge and culture" (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.183). Waugh refers here to Richard Rorty's theory of textualisation and consensus; his vision of solidarity where little pieces are brought together as opposed to the formulation of one grand theory. We can see this utopian vision within the fictional work of many postmodern women writers, for example Doris Lessing's denouement of *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974). In this novel the female protagonist watches many different itinerant tribes as they pass by her house but the final image is of many people working on a single tapestry. We can also see the patchwork effect in postmodern historiographic metafiction such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) where competing narratives from history are wrought together in a highly complex pattern alongside fictional accounts from differing narrative perspectives and genres. In terms of aesthetics, this patterning serves to create a whole out of disparate 'stories' whilst emphasising the fragmented nature of truth; all accounts, whether they be from history or fiction, are still stories.

Another aestheticised version of strong reconstructive postmodernism, also problematic in terms of emancipatory politics, is that of the rhetoric of the 'sublime' wherein a utopian space is envisaged outside of rationality, or beyond language. Otherness or difference can be seen to exist beyond the law. As we have seen, madness, hysteria, or a return to the body within women's texts can be read as a romanticised occupation of this sublime space. Waugh sees this critique of reason, prevalent in the nineteen-eighties, as "a dangerous tendency" because, rather than persevering with a project which would politically transform physical space,

imaginary spaces become politicised. Indeed, French feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous were criticised for their mystification of the 'other' and their work was appropriated, especially by male theorists, for this kind of postmodern reading. The sublime space became feminised and these imaginary language games, rather than challenging stereo-typical notions of femininity, in fact furthered the identification of real women with "a mysterious, irrational and unrepresentable 'otherness' (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.184).

The perfecting of the female body through technology, as well as advances in reproductive science, leads to a future vision of women not as real but as robots. Naomi Wolf tells us that: "The spectre of the future is not that women will be slaves, but that we will be robots" (Wolf: 1991, p.267). Through genetic engineering women will be bred for passivity and beauty, thus technology will perpetuate the destabilization of the female body:

Whatever the future threatens, we can be fairly sure of this: Women in our "raw" or "natural" state will continue to be shifted from category "woman" to category "ugly," and shamed into an assembly-line physical identity. As each woman responds to the pressure, it will grow so intense that it will become obligatory, until no self-respecting woman will venture outdoors with a surgically unaltered face. The free market will compete to cut up women's bodies more cheaply, if more sloppily, with no-frills surgery in bargain basement clinics. In that atmosphere, it is a matter of time before they reposition the clitoris, sew up the vagina for a snugger fit, loosen the throat muscles, and sever the gag reflex. [...]

The machine is at the door. Is she the future?

Wolf: 1991, p.269.

Writers such as Wolf and Greer have much to say as regards the damaging effects of plastic surgery on women in our times. Greer tells us that "the man-made woman is well on her way to ousting the born woman" (Greer: *The Observer Review*, 19th October 1997). The female breast, with its artificial implants, is becoming ever-more preferable to a breast which can feed an infant. Is this freedom for women? Clearly women have the right to choose not to treat their bodies as merely instruments for nurture but, to what extent are women still pandering to male ideals of femininity when they choose to undergo the knife?

Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1985) is a deliberate attempt to blur the "natural" order wherein men

take a dominant position in the sciences and women are closer to the natural and emotional world. She celebrates female intervention in technology, offering a different stance to that of the eco-feminist who would see science and technology as largely masculine/masculinist areas which have been responsible for female oppression and the destruction of nature in the name of technological progress. Haraway's cyborg transgresses the boundaries between machine/organism, fact/fiction, imagination/socio-material reality, it is a hybridic mythical/historical/scientific transformation which belongs to a "world without gender" (Haraway in Kemp and Squires: 1997, p. 475). Haraway would argue that the cyborg is a new form of political identity which transcends all boundaries and categories:

This chapter is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. Perhaps more faithful as blasphemy is faithful, than as reverent worship and identification. Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. ... Blasphemy protects one from the Moral Majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honored within socialist feminism. At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg.  
Haraway in Kemp and Squires: 1997, p. 474.

This voice seems to echo Foucaultian notions of boundlessness regarding identity whilst the tone, despite the feminist content, is particularly reminiscent of Nietzsche's rhetorical and ironic articulation of autonomous self-construction.

Whilst Haraway's cyberfeminism might be repudiating any claims that woman's identity is more closely linked to nature and man's to culture, her deliberate irony and aestheticism can be read as an obscure game rather than a serious engagement in politics. It seems that the more complex and flexible the theory the more diffuse its polemical purpose. But Haraway anticipates this criticism of non-relation to social, lived realities and sees her writing as an attempt at epistemology and politics. Hoping to locate an area of unity, perhaps a politics of recognition and acceptance, she sets up two corresponding lists showing the transition from the "old hierarchical domination" such as the "Public/private", "Nature/culture" oppositions to

"the scary new networks [she has] called the informatics of domination," specifically "Cyborg citizenship" and "Fields of Difference" as replacements for the above. This is a common movement, and one which we cannot reverse, but the cyborg is not passively constructed within these new systems:

The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code.

Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide. Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, that is, as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings.

Haraway in Kemp and Squires: 1997, p. 480.

It is clear that Haraway wants to move beyond notions of universality and essentialism, the anti-science movement and out of what she considers to be the restrictive dualism of earlier feminist thinking but this "go-with-the -flow" intellectualism is still, I would propose, a difficult area, especially when we consider the recent public outrage in the late nineties regarding Genetically Modified food products. Enough private voices have been raised refusing this technology in our homes, fridges and bodies, and large public, corporate bodies, such as Sainsbury's supermarkets, have reassured their customers that all GM foods have been withdrawn from their shelves. The emergence of shelves and fridges devoted to organically grown foods in large supermarket chains also suggests a reluctance on the part of many consumers to allow the blurring of scientific and natural boundaries. Whilst Haraway "would rather be a cyborg than a goddess", referring to the spiritualization of Eco-feminism in the early to mid-eighties, it is clear that we are witnessing the emergence of an "eco-warrior" who is demanding material/political results perhaps similar to that anti-technological movement signalled by Marcuse amongst others in the mid-sixties (2).

The reality of the cyborg cannot be denied given the more positive technological advances within medical practices. Haraway notes the blurring of the animal/human distinction pointing to the hypothetical, as yet, vision of transplanting baboon hearts within human bodies. We

have witnessed recently the real incorporation of mechanical hearts within the human body as an interim measure to prolong life thus crossing the boundary between machine/human. A mechanical heart can function, for a short time, bridging the gap between an individual's heart failure and the transplant of another functioning human heart into that individual's body. However hopeful these advances may be, I would argue that Haraway's intellectual, elitist pluralism is not a political, materialist vision because its premise is not one which reshapes reality, rather it is one which points towards utopia. A utopian vision may be ardent but by definition it is a view of nowhere (*Gk ou* not & *topos* place). The existence of fluid sexualities, and the notion that "gender is a continuum" is not in question but the insistence of recognition from every perspective unsettles movements which have claimed some kind of marginal discretion and this has problematic implications relating to political activism (3). Unlike Wolf and Greer, Haraway is not about to point the way forward as regards challenging 'the beauty myth' or how women should react positively to the ageing process (see Greer *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (1991)). Nor would I offer her theories as a means to counteract the anxieties suffered by young girls in the twenty-first century who are concerned to avoid, at all costs, the negative exposure which was focused on Jade in this Summer's 'Big Brother' programme (Channel Four, 2002). We cannot afford to ignore the damaging effects of such media coverage if we are to provide safe passage for our society's daughters.

Haraway, then, offers a critique of the metanarratives of science and politics; her position constitutes a repudiation of the notion that the grand theories of science, nature and philosophy reflect external truths. Rationalism is not grounded nor is it unitary, rather it is fragmented and exists only across multiple language games which carry within them their own internal rules. In terms of feminism, gender "can no longer be regarded as an essential or even a stable category, nor can it be used to explain the practices of human



societies as a whole. It is no longer legitimate to appeal to the category 'women' to ground a metanarrative of political practice - even in the name of emancipation" (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.185). This premise signals a move away from essentialism and theories of difference, but it is problematic because it would follow that there are no truths relating to female experience which can be used to explain oppression.

Lyotard utilises the same examples for de-legitimising classical scientific method in *The Postmodern Condition* (1985); according to him the new sciences should replace those discredited epistemologies and Cartesian Doubt should be replaced by Uncertainty. In the postmodern age rational critique should be subjugated and the verification of hypotheses through observable external phenomena is understood to be constantly undermined by the notion of fictionality. The Uncertainty Principle of quantum physics, for example, blurs the boundaries between aesthetic and scientific knowledge. A postmodern world is an aestheticised world and science plays a direct part in this with its more recent emphasis on the unseen. All this "impinges on" strong postmodern feminism, the problem being that if we believe that all is fiction, if all is uncertain and immaterial, then we could be compromising the project of liberation for actual material women who live in an actual material world (4).

In Jeanette Winterson's novel *Gut Symmetries* (1997) the central male character, Jove, works on Grand Unified Theories: "that sought to unite the strong, weak, and electromagnetic quanta in a sympathetic symmetry that would include gravity and overturn the bolt-it-together-somehow methods of The Standard Model" (Winterson: 1998, p.97). Jove criticises The Standard Model because he connects the theories of physics to human relationships:

The attraction of the Model is that it recognises the symmetries of the three fundamental forces, weak force, strong force, electromagnetic force. Difficulties begin when these three separate forces are arbitrarily welded together.

*His wife, his mistress, met.*

Winterson: 1998, p.97.

This novel seems to be looking for answers to reality through the Greeks, Christianity, Newton, Einstein, Darwin and the modern scientific theory of quantum physics. These theories are threaded together with fantasy and narratives of beginnings, family and origin. The dominant narrator is Alice, a scientist, and secondly Stella, a poet. When they meet they fall in love. Alice's sense of self is clearly fragmented and unstable:

My self-esteem is a jigsaw I cannot complete. I get one part of the picture and the rest lies in pieces. I suspect that there is no picture, only fragments. Other people seem to glue it together somehow and not to worry that they have been using pieces from several different boxes. So what is the answer? Is identity a deceit, a make-shift, and should we hurry to make any pattern we can? Or is there a coherence, perhaps a beauty, if it were possible to find it? I would like to convince myself about myself but I cannot. The best there is are days when the jigsaw assumes its own meaning and I no longer care what picture is emerging. By that I mean I am unfrightened by the unexpected.  
Winterson: 1998, p. 113.

The notion of the Superstring Theory which is repeated throughout calls into question all stability and parallel universes are offered as possible alternatives in which to exist. An understanding of quantum physics and wave functions also offers an alternative to the notion that death is final (Winterson: 1998, pp. 160 & 161).

There is only one section where Jove is allowed a narrative voice and this is where he justifies his cannibalistic consumption of Stella's body. Like Rochester's complaining voice in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968), Jove explains his perception of his wife's madness: "I was attracted to her energy without realising that it was a kind of craziness" (Winterson: 1998, p.190). To Jove there is nothing mystical in life, only that which has not yet been explained. He distances himself from the irrational in Stella which can imagine beyond the material:

My wife believed that she had a kind of interior universe as valid and as necessary as her day-to-day existence in reality. This failure to make a hierarchy, this failure to recognise the primacy of fact, justified her increasingly subjective responses. She refused to make a clear distinction between inner and outer. She had no sure grasp either of herself or of herself in relation to the object. At first I mistook this pathology as the ordinary feminine.  
Winterson: 1998, p.191.

But Jove loses control, he fears the dissolution of subject and object in the imaginary. His need to retain sanity results in him cutting himself because corporeal pain equals existence. The material and the metaphysical, the rational and the irrational are constantly at play throughout

this novel.

Helena Grice and Tim Woods argue that Winterson has appropriated postmodern debates about the dissolution between science and art in order to express her own sense of postmodern subjectivity:

Winterson has cannily latched on to the recent debates within theoretical physics as a means of providing her with a central metaphor to describe her postmodern sense of the instability and perpetual flux of the universe. In addition to Superstrings, Winterson has also appropriated the terminology of Quantum Physics, the indeterminacy principle and the General Theory of Relativity, as discourses allied to the postmodern discourse on epistemological insecurity and ontological instability. Grice and Woods: 1998, p.118.

Materiality and rational thought, fragmentation and mergence, magic, religion, poetry, all are brought together in a complex pattern in Winterson's novel. It is perhaps interesting that the male scientist, Jove, is not a rigorous thinker; he is neurotic. Jove's weakness is seen through his need to consume and possess and this would seem to undermine his scientific methodology. It is the romance between Stella and Alice which is central. Winterson's familiar themes of the love triangle and unstable sexual identities reflect postmodern uncertainty as regards gender but whilst she appropriates the language of science, often as a metaphor for love, Winterson's engagement with the new sciences is schematic and largely unresolved (5). Whilst the female poet and the female scientist unite, there is still no room for a male scientific rationale.

Haraway's cyborg offers a solution to the void created when feminists exile themselves from the masculine dream of wholeness in Enlightenment theories. A hybrid creature, both machine and organism, both real and fantastic, the cyborg would undermine the founding myth of the Enlightenment that in the absence of a transcendent deity the dualisms of the mind/body, consciousness/cosmos, art/science, custom/reason could be reconciled. Haraway will not allow the differentiation between art and science, human and machine and yet "the cyborg promises ultimate reconciliation in a postmodernist and posthumanist world" (Waugh in Jackson and

Jones: 1998, p.187). Haraway reiterates Lyotard's renunciation of any possibility of wholeness. In terms of feminist politics, she claims an emancipatory potential in the movement from organicism to industrialisation, namely that the vast increase of information in our postmodern age serves to explode the concepts of subjectivity and truth which have formerly oppressed women. But we must question the efficacy of this notion in terms of ethics and agency.

The cyborg is another example of the postmodern sublime. This otherness is problematic for feminist politics because it romanticises the unrepresentable. The emphasis on a marginal position only repeats patriarchal control although it is supposedly disguised as a liberatory discourse. Haraway's and Lyotard's perspectival constructivism is posited as a more ethical position than that of the grand narrative, or totalising knowledges, but the view from everywhere results in an ignorance or neglect of the constraints placed on our "actual being in the world":

Moreover, without the capacity to stand back, to believe in the view from nowhere as a kind of regulative principle underpinning our attempts to know and judge, we would be unable to discriminate amongst different points of view. Postmodern hybridity, nomadism, fragmentation and endless fictionality may seem to offer an escape route from biological, social and cosmic determinism. However, if they preclude the possibility of discrimination between, and negotiation across, multiple positions and discourses, then it is difficult to see how such a radical or strong postmodernism could form the basis for any kind of politics, ethics or epistemology which assumes the necessity for the personal and collective agency and responsibility.  
Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.188.

Waugh suggests that there might be a need to invest in grand narratives whilst being aware that all knowledges are embedded in local and particular cultural traditions. Within the particularity and situatedness of weak postmodernism we might be able to reach "a shared structure of values, a sense of personal significance, and the possibility of belief in historical progress through collective engagements which do not require foundations of truth or value" (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.188). Objectivity (the view from nowhere) is thus grounded "and combined with the perspective of the culturally situated and embodied subject."

Within weak postmodernism the "fluid, disembodied and centreless subject" is no longer regarded as a utopia (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.188). Waugh regards some reconstructive postmodernism which emerges from hermeneutic critique as 'weak' because it does not deny the possibility of agency or "the need to experience the self as a coherent and consistent, if revisable entity". Also, some theories within this mode recognise "that ethics requires a subject" (Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.189) (6). However, other examples, such as communitarian postmodern theory, seem 'strong.' Whilst the centreless cyborgian theory still carries with it an insistence that truth and value are internal to the condition of a particular community or framework, I would argue that relationality is not central to Haraway's theory. A communitarian project would surely take account of the truth and value of women's relationships within society as well as their positioning as regards socio-historical and scientific narratives.

Seyla Benhabib's work on the relationship between feminist theory and politics and its relation to postmodern aesthetics seems to offer a third position which can perhaps stabilise or at least calm the rocking of the boat. In her introduction to *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (1992) Benhabib argues for what she terms a "post-Enlightenment project of interactive universalism" (Benhabib: 1992, p.3). This universalism would repudiate metaphysical Enlightenment claims of a "disembedded and disembodied Subject" (Benhabib: 1992, p. 4) and incorporate in its place "an embodied and embedded human self whose identity is constituted narratively" (Benhabib: 1992, p.6). Benhabib argues for an interaction, rather than legislation, which would take account of gender difference and contextual situatedness (Benhabib: 1992, p.3). She is interested to justify "those contingent processes of socialization through which an infant becomes a person, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, becomes capable of projecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well"

and to establish "a discursive, communicative concept of rationality" (Benhabib: 1992, p.5).

This discursive, communicative self, therefore, moves beyond a Foucaultian position because she is not only able to reflect on but also to challenge her situatedness (Benhabib: 1992, p.8).

. Benhabib's theories include a moral and ethical code which enlarge upon the Nietzschean/Foucauldian premise of the individual because it aims to take account of "the standpoint of others" (Benhabib:1992, p.9). Within a communitarian perspective Benhabib offers a critique of the notion of an "unencumbered self" (Benhabib: 1987, pp.10-13) and makes a distinction between what she terms "the Generalized and the Concrete Other" (7). Central to much feminist theory is the notion that women have been formerly enclosed within the private and marginalised from the public spheres of experience. In the postmodern world, however, women have found themselves crossing the borders between these two modes of existence. In the latter part of the Twentieth Century women have begun to move daily between different groups and communities in the world beyond home. Nevertheless, the experience of the private and domestic sphere is bound to influence our behaviour in the public domain (8).

Benhabib points out that "universal" theories of the moral self not only privatize and thus exclude women's experience, they also view the moral self as "a *disembedded* and *disembodied* being" who is concerned only with the standpoint of a "generalized other," who is also disembedded and disembodied. These moral theories Benhabib terms "*substitutionalist*" because, whilst they claim to be universal they come out of a specific group of subjects: invariably white, male adults who are propertied or at least "professional" (Benhabib:1987, p.81). She is concerned to articulate an "*anticipatory-utopian critique*" of the social organization which comes out of this limited perspective and suggests an alternative mode from a feminist perspective, to replace "*substitutionalist*" theory with "*interactive*" universalism which takes account of multiple perspectives (Benhabib: 1987, p.81). Whilst the

"generalized other" should not be discounted; "the recognition of the dignity and worthiness of the generalized other is a *necessary*, albeit not *sufficient*, condition to define the moral standpoint in modern societies, we must also include the standpoint of the "concrete other" which is not disembedded but situated and "defines our relationships as private, noninstitutional ones, concerned with love, care, friendship and intimacy" (Benhabib: 1987, p.92).

Benhabib's utopian goal of interactive universalism is inclusive. This ethical theory is based on the necessity that concrete subjects communicate with concrete others and enter into dialogue with other situated selves in order to interpret and reflect upon needs and transform cultural organizations which silence, or discount those needs. This is particularly important for women because the privatization of female experience has silenced any attempt to give voice to those needs and discounted any discussion which may have come out of reflection. Consequently, the vision of autonomy and human identity cannot be fully integrated until we have reached a fully integrated communicative concept of rationality which takes account of the generalized and the concrete other. Benhabib recognises concerns about utopian thinking which may result in either instrumentalism or else apathy as regards critique of the present condition but these concerns should not lead to a rejection of the hope of achieving utopia. As we have seen, weak postmodernism in its communitarian form is more attractive to feminists such as Benhabib who would resist 'Uncertainty' because it threatens emancipatory ideals and political action. Feminism in this form would contextualise theories of knowledge, embrace Enlightenment principles of rationality and hold onto utopian notions of progress. This feminist/rationalist stance necessitates a perspective from where we are and an image of that world from the outside with ourselves in it. By contrast a strong deconstructive postmodernism retreats from such utopian visions due to the deep sense of disillusionment regarding a perfect society.

Waugh makes the distinction between the "aesthetic fictions" where "there is no responsibility for accurate depiction of historical reality" and the nowhere of objective knowledge which should aim "to describe material realities" (Jackson and Jones:1998, p.191).

Waugh suggests that feminists should be wary of strong postmodernism which denies this distinction. Waugh refers to the fiction of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson where "history may be deconstructed as an endless regress of mirrors or reinvented in fantastic form":

The Nowhere of the aesthetic, however, may provide imaginary visions, but only the Nowhere at the end of, and guiding rational thought, can attempt to determine the historical consequences of their actual realisation. For a feminist politics committed to the futures of actual women in the world, the rather more earth bound and situated reason of weak postmodernism may complement the stronger postmodernist impulses at work in experimental art and literature.

Jackson and Jones, 1998:191-192

Whilst Haraway would celebrate women's involvement in technology and Wolf would express her anxiety because women are becoming less and less human, I would agree that the aesthetics of Angela Carter, and to a lesser degree Jeanette Winterson, do complement a postmodern feminist vision. Reading Carter and Winterson entails an encounter with fiction which represents a non-rationalist space of the sublime; certainly, the material realities of female experience are not the obvious focus of these texts which abound with grotesque representations of the body. However, in terms of politics, my reading of these texts (particularly Carter's) does not exclude the possibility of an appropriation for a feminist project which would expose constructions of femininity, uncover the result of oppression and encourage the need to rebel. Carter and Winterson seem concerned to kill off the 'Angel in the House' and move towards an embrace of the monstrous in female form. Although I do not have space to consider in depth the body of Carter's and Winterson's work, I feel that a brief investigation of their fantastic, postmodern bodies is perhaps a positive place to end.



## Fantastic Bodies

My title "Fantastic Bodies" refers back to our discussion regarding cybernetics (the human / machine) but will include here an investigation of a more organic hybrid (human / animal) as explored particularly through the character of Fevvers in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). I have become interested in the thematic connection between the fabulous characters created by Carter and Winterson and how these can be appropriated within feminist readings. The excessive, part-human creatures such as Mother, the many breasted scientist / goddess in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Fevvers, the giant aerialiste whose huge wings are both a source of beauty and fascination, in Carter's later novel, I believe, give us a clear insight into Carter's philosophy as related to the female body. Characters in Winterson's fiction such as the web-footed protagonist Villanelle in *The Passion* (1987) and the giantess Dog-Woman in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) are also of interest to feminist readers especially if we have been disappointed by the diseased body of Louise, the love-object in Winterson's later novel *Written on the Body* (1996) (9). Theories regarding the function of fantasy writing alongside those which comment on the role of folklore and the carnivalesque in women's fiction might be particularly helpful to read alongside Wolf's more realist *The Beauty Myth* (1991). I will also consider why it is that fictional characters such as Fevvers should be so attractive and appealing to us. Why do these fantastic bodies invite such an affectionate response despite their obvious lack of verisimilitude? How is it that the exaggerations of fantasy writing can be disruptive?

Much critical reading of Carter and Winterson makes reference to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin whose writing on carnival, the grotesque body and dialogic theory will be of use to us here. Lucie Armitt explains in *Theorising the Fantastic* (1996) that "Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque has been central to our understanding of the literature of the

body as a political aesthetic" (Armitt: 1996, p.67). As feminist readers concerned with the body there is much to be gained from a Bakhtinian reading of Carter and Winterson as Armitt explains:

One particular strand of the dark side of the carnivalesque has recently flourished under the scrutiny of feminist theory. Intrinsically concerned with the centrality of the body to subjectivity, sexuality and the politics of power, feminist literary critics have frequently argued a case for the woman's existence as monster under patriarchal law. Woman may be the body *in* society, but she is excluded or marginalized by the body *of* society, even as she employs such carnivalesque processes for her own revolutionary ends.

Armitt: 1996, p.70.

Mary Russo's writing on the female grotesque begins from an autobiographical perspective explaining that a part of her upbringing was the teaching that "making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger", the danger being that of exposure a "loss of boundaries" (Russo in de Laurentis: 1988, p.213). She considers feminine masquerade in terms of cultural politics and explains that the carnivalesque: "has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection, marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system" (Russo in de Laurentis: 1988, p.214). Thus the normal taboos surrounding the female body could be dissolved. However, as Russo explains, early carnival both reinforced and undermined these taboos. Women both disputed their place and invited contempt which served to further establish the boundaries outside of carnival. Whereas Bakhtin sees the unconstrained laughter and speech associated with carnival as wholly positive, Russo points out that women risked becoming further estranged from the centre of their communities; they became not only dangerous but were also in danger. Bakhtin fails to recognise, for example, the fear and loathing stimulated by the figure of the pregnant hag (10).

In Bakhtin "the individual body in excess" is used to explore "social, collective significance" and to interrogate 'serious' mainstream political agendas" (Bakhtin: 1984, p. 67).

Carnival is still commonly seen as "holiday excess" which flouts the limits and prohibitions of

everyday existence and the restrictions imposed on populace by authoritarian bodies. Thus the body and the pleasures of the flesh, dance, eroticism, music, and feasting, are brought back to the centre. Laws, which normally keep the body under control are transgressed; the damned challenge authority and the dominant, hegemonic social order with their profanity and vulgarity (Bakhtin: 1984, pp. 67-68). Bakhtin's writing on the material body within the heritage of folk humour is excessive, exaggerated, fleshy. This is related, I believe, to the characters of Carter's later novels.

The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious.

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material body principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.

Bakhtin: 1984, p. 19.

The emphasis on fertility, abundance, the positive aspects of a collective, festive body, rather than an isolated, individualised body can clearly be read in the extended, rather than nuclear, family plots of *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991). Like Plath, Carter was interested to embrace low culture and we can see clearly another connection here with Bakhtin's theory:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.

Bakhtin: 1984, pp. 19-20.

In Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" he claims that "there is no unitary language or style in the novel" (Bakhtin in Lodge: 1988, p.131). The two myths that are undermined by the historical evolution of novelistic discourse are that there is only one language and that language is unified. At the end of this essay which traces the development

from the classical period in Rome and Greece to Western literary consciousness in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, he suggests that the task which remains is to consider the impact of speech genres in folk language on the formulation of the novel. I would argue that Carter has been instrumental in continuing this project with her revision of the fairy-tale and her parody of carnivalesque structures.

### ***Nights at the Circus* (1984)**

The swan motif which appears at the climax of *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) is one which is more centrally continued in *Nights at the Circus*. Fevvers the "Cockney Venus" is the voice who opens this later novel. Carter describes this character as "Mae West with wings" (Carter in Haffenden: 1985, p. 88) Like Helen of Troy, Fevvers explains that she was hatched "out of a bloody great egg." She is an antipathy to Melanie with her bawdy language and hedonistic life-style. The humour throughout this novel is a marked contrast to the menace and pathos in *The Magic Toyshop*. We often find this bottle blonde gorging herself on food and drink and, at six foot two and fourteen stone, she makes a contrasting figure to that thin, fragile, adolescent, snow-white body in *The Magic Toyshop*: "The blond guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter." Inherited from her "putative father" she has wings which are most of the time hidden under her clothing "where they made an uncomfortable looking pair of bulges, shuddering the surface of the taut fabric from time to time as if desirous of breaking loose. (Carter: 1994, pp. 7 & 8). (11)

Fevvers is interviewed by Walser at the tail end of the nineteenth century, a timid young journalist whose mission it is to find out if she is "fact or fiction." She is a marvellous spectacle, a survivor not a victim, and the message is always that one can look but not touch. Walser is struck by her "physical ungainliness" and considers her "a lump" (pp. 16 & 17). He

wonders why has she arms *and* wings and why has she a belly button if she was indeed hatched. She narrates her scrapes and escapes from those who would exploit her or wish to keep her prisoner. Left in a basket, adopted, protected and brought up in a whorehouse by Lizzie and Ma Nelson, her surrogate mothers, she learnt to fly. Later she tries to support her family by earning her keep as a curiosity in Madame Schreck's "museum of woman monsters" as "the only fully feathered intacta in the entire history of the world." (pp. 55 & 71) Even when sold to Mr Rosencreutz for "the promise of hard cash" she escapes intact because she will be no man's May sacrifice (p.83). Hence to the Circus where she performs as aerialiste, a fabulous bird in a gilded cage (p.14 & 107).

When the circus rope is tampered with, Waltser witnesses the use of Fevvers' wings to right her balance but also watches her come conventionally to earth down the ladder. This event makes him realise that she is both marvellous creature and woman:

he was enchanted by the paradox: if she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then - she was no longer a wonder.

She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but - a freak. Marvellous indeed, but a marvellous monster, an exemplary being denied the human privilege of flesh and blood, always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy, an alien creature forever estranged.

She owes it to herself to remain a woman, he thought. It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none.

As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman?

Then he saw she was pale under her rouge, as if recovering from real fear, and bundling herself in her feathery cape as if it would warm her. She gave him a thin smile.

(p. 161)

The character of Walser, the journalist, is important because for a large part of the narrative we see Fevvers only through his eyes. Only in the final stages of the novel, when the couple are separated, does Fevvers begin to narrate her own story. In order to follow Fevvers' company Walser has had to join the circus as a clown and becomes an apprentice of the Colonel who promises a journey across Siberia. Walser becomes part of the "Dance of disintegration; and of regression; celebration of the primal slime" (p.125). Kristeva's definition of carnivalesque structure is interesting here when we consider Walser, not only as a clown,

but also as the would-be author of Fevver's story:

A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask.

Kristeva: 1980, p. 78.

Walser himself becomes a hybrid of fact and fiction when he joins the circus:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognise himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom that, during all the time he spent with the Colonel, never quite evaporated; until that last moment when they parted company and Walser's very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque.

(p. 103)

The forward pointing reference to Walser's loss of self and madness is the result of the Trans-Siberian Train crashing in the vast deserted snow-scape in which Fevvers' right wing is broken and Walser is knocked unconscious, then buried alive. The circus survivors are kidnapped by outlaws and Walser is left behind. He is later dug out by an escaped murderess but abandoned because he has clearly lost his memory and his mind, his only words being "Cock-a-doodle-do!" Covered in feathers and half-naked, he is "a sentient being, still, but not a rational one; indeed he is all sensibility, without a grain of sense, and sense impressions alone have the power to shock and ravish him" (p. 236). Walser is apprenticed by a shaman and Carter explains that this part of the novel brings up questions of what is real and what not. Her purpose is to deromanticize primitive tribal law, and to present shamanism as just another epistemology: "every social system tends to denaturize people, it's one of the things about living in groups; since you can't live on your own and retain your social identity, it's just one more bit of the difficulty of being!" (Carter in Haffenden: 1985, pp. 88-89) Carter defends her portrayal of Walser, he is not an object or a victim, rather she explains that she intended to present him as being unable to maintain "the illusion of his own scepticism" :

his rather two-dimensional idea of himself - as the foreign correspondent, the person in control, the permanent bystander, with the privileged marginality of the journalist - has to be broken down before

he can become ... not a fit mate for Fevvers at all, but a serious person [...] he does become an object [...] But nobody forces Jack Walser to behave as a human chicken. It is a systematic humiliation, but it's not Fevvers who does it to him - it's life.  
(pp. 89-90)

After the train crash, Lizzie and Fevvers leave the circus crew and set off alone, Fevvers determined to find her lost young American. To Lizzie's dismay Fevvers decides she has fallen in love and wants to marry and mate. She argues her case, despite Lizzie's warning that Walser may not want to acquiesce:

Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well - I'll *sit* on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century - '

Lizzie detected a note of rising hysteria in the girl's voice.  
(p. 281)

Lizzie is concerned that she will give herself away, perhaps echoing our concerns for Melanie at the end of *The Magic Toyshop*: "'I raised you up to fly to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs'" (p.282). But this denouement begins to offer a more positive vision of male / female relationships; one in which the woman is not trapped. Fevvers tries to convince Lizzie that Walser's role as secretary, recording women's stories, can bring humanity into a new mode as regards relationships between the sexes:

'The doll's house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed -'  
(p. 285)

Lizzie, the old witch with more foresight, is not convinced by Fevver's rapturous and utopian hopes for the New Woman and indeed when the couple first reunite there are disturbing reverberations of Melanie's coupling. Although Fevvers has wrestled him to the ground, it is he who has power over her. Under his gaze Fevvers feels that she is being seen as "natural, but abominable" (p.289) He sings "'Only a bird in a gilded cage'" to her in a voice which is "like the very essence of madness" and she is afraid of losing herself: "She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea" (p.289) (12). Fevvers struggles for subjectivity,

knowledge and mastery of her self:

In Walser's eyes, she saw herself, at last, swimming into definition, like the image on photographic paper; but, instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream.

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?'

(p. 290)

Her only means of escape is to show her feathers but she knows with one broken wing and her faded plumage that she is no splendid goddess. However, when she is seen by Walser's companions she knows that she has inspired them and this refreshes her spirits. She performs and thus becomes herself, winning the heart of the reconstructed Walser.

Finally, we have reached a much more positive denouement regarding love and family. This text ends with Fevver's contagious laughter when Walser asks why she wanted to convince him that she was the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world"?

She began to laugh.

'I fooled you, then!' she said. 'Gawd, I fooled you!'

She laughed so much the bed shook.

'You mustn't believe what you write in the papers!' she assured him, stuttering and hiccuping with mirth. 'To think I fooled you!'

[...] Fevvers' laughter seeped through the gaps in the window-frames of all the houses in the village; the villagers stirred in their beds, chuckling at the enormous joke that invaded their dreams, of which they would remember nothing in the morning except the mirth it caused. She laughed, she laughed, she laughed.

[...] The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. Or so it seemed to the deceived husband, who found himself laughing too, even if he was not quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke. Fevvers, sputtering to a stop at last, crouched above him, covering his face with kisses. Oh, how pleased with him she was!

'To think I really fooled you!' she marvelled. 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence.'  
(pp. 294-295)

The final word "confidence" marks a movement towards autonomy which "surmise" did not suggest in *The Toyshop*.

In response to the laughing denouement of *Nights at the Circus* Marina Warner refers to Bakhtin's account of "the survival of the *risus pascalis*, 'Easter laughter', medieval laughter, blasphemous but permitted" (Warner in Sage: 1994, p.253). According to Bakhtin, folk humour belonged to the people, people were embraced and carried away by laughter; laughter



became irresistible. Warner sees Carter's appropriation of carnival laughter as a political response:

The irony is that Angela Carter clowned more and more over the length of her prolific career because she saw, with her sharp-eyed mordancy, that in her struggle for change she was losing ground - that through Thatcher's eighties and in the world they were creating, all too many were able to resist - by turning a deaf ear to 'the truth of laughter' and much besides. She knew that humour was a last-ditch stratagem, even an admission of defeat: this is the nub of the irony.  
Warner in Sage: 1994, pp. 253-254

It is Carter's contagious, infectious humour and her refusal to ignore the problematic effect of Thatcherite individualism which makes Carter's aesthetic feminist project important to the modern reader. Carter's lowbrow, Rabelaisian, carnivalesque themes can be seen throughout her work, from *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) to *Wise Children* (1991). In these texts women are not afraid of their bodies and not afraid of their sexuality. She presents positive images of ageing women who are not wringing their hands in despair like the woman in Plath's poem "The Mirror" (1961). Like the fabulous phoenix in "Lady Lazarus" (1962), Fevvers rises from the ashes of the burnt out toyshop, but not in order "to eat men like air."

I believe that there is still much ground to cover here. Carter must be read as a leading feminist postmodern writer because in her later exploration of the postmodern sublime she continues to explode patriarchal notions of femininity and embrace communitarian values which would complement those more realist and equally important texts from de Beauvoir, Greer and Wolf. The movement towards autonomy which can be traced through her fantastic heroines marks a positive movement within her writing about females and their bodies.

## Conclusion

Perhaps, in this third wave of feminism, we can avoid further madnesses by re-addressing the necessity for a shared vision. In my readings of fictional and non-fictional, fantastic and realist texts, I feel I have uncovered a magic thread which might lead us safely out of the forest; a common voice reminding us that we are not alone, that we have a responsibility towards one another, and that, whilst we can imagine ourselves anyway we please, 'real women' exist in a real world. In order to avoid being passively constructed as 'man-made' women, in order to avoid being driven mad by that fabrication, we need to work out, individually and together, who we are. It is my hope that our bodies can be both fantastic and real, that we can transcend fictional patriarchal constructs whilst situating ourselves positively, in fiction and in society, as women. Greer asked "What *will* you do?" at the end of *The Female Eunuch* (1969) and, in relation to women's perception of themselves, Wolf asked "What *will* we see?" at the end of *The Beauty Myth* (1991) because how we see ourselves will determine how we inhabit our bodies and our world (Wolf: 1991, p.291). This is no less true in 2003. The problem of female subjectivity is not resolved, but we must not give up the resolve to *see* together, to tell one another that we are all beautiful, and to listen to one another's stories.

I believe that our aesthetic explorations of women's literature can offer us a wealth of knowledge which gives us a much needed access into female consciousness. I began by exposing notions of female 'madness' as a means of transcending those patriarchal concepts which seek to harness women's relationship with their bodies, language and fantasy. I feel we have ended on an equally political note in our attempts to address the postmodern sublime as it relates to female subjectivity. Writing and reading about the body continues to be an important aesthetic and polemical practice; we continue to politicise our imaginary and our real spaces as we seek to reconcile the relationship between the body and the mind. Our imagined futures

cannot realistically be aligned with the grotesque or cybernetic bodies we have latterly encountered and yet these utopian visions have their place within postmodern, feminist politics and literature.

· Carter embraced the notion of the female subject as both author and actor whilst acknowledging the difficulty of that practice. At the end of her short story "The Flesh and the Mirror" (1974) she asks: "[T]he most difficult performance in the world is acting naturally, isn't it? Everything else is artful." (Carter: 1988, p.70) As long as we insist upon an autonomous self-construction and become the authors and the actors in our real and imagined worlds then surely we can embrace a fantastic, transcendent *and* an embodied, immanent notion of female subjectivity. As we have seen in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf was able to hold in balance within the same texts her insistence on the need for everyday, communicative relationships and the withdrawal of a transcendent, reflective self. Both are necessary. Also, whilst critics may argue that Plath's transcendence in her final poems was both indicative of her suicidal impulses and of her revelation as a true artist, we have seen Plath's importance as a writer of shorter popular fiction which takes for its focus the lives of women in domestic circumstances; clearly for Plath female subjectivity in its situated and embodied state was a subject worth addressing in her work. It is also worth noting that her first drafts of the *Ariel* poems were written on the back of the same paper she had used for her original manuscript of *The Bell Jar*. This palimpsestic writing is, I believe, indicative of Plath's inclusion of the transcendent and immanent themes which exist across the body of her work, if not in the same published volumes.

It seems that we are constantly brought back to a celebration of the multiplicity of female experience. The tendencies begun within my aesthetic readings of the work of our two main writers here, Woolf and Plath, remain as central concerns within the postmodern sublime.

Transcendence may lead to freedom, to "madness", to death, even to suicide and, clearly, we

cannot exist exist within a utopian and transcendent sublime. Therefore, as situated, embodied selves, what can we achieve by imagining ourselves beyond the material? Our postmodern uncertainty is certainly related to our ontological insecurity and whilst materiality and relationality are part of our daily existence, the fantastic sexualisation of aesthetic vision can also play its part in our feminist projects. Carter's playful celebration of the flesh, exaggerated in the grotesque and sublime *Fevvers* is surely less nihilistic in its rebellion against constructions of femininity than Gilman's narration of a heroine who has transcended the flesh via a seeming descent into madness. If thinking beyond the real can lead to infectious laughter, this seems a far more positive place to finish than a vision of infected minds. The aesthetic practice of writing and reading about women's lives, however fantastic, must continue because it continues to offer a means of healing or at least managing the crisis of female subjectivity.

## Notes

- (1) See *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism* (1999), edited by David Fuller and Patricia Waugh. This collection of essays considers from varying perspectives the debate between scientific and aesthetic models of knowledge. Of particular interest is the borrowing of discourses practised by critics and philosophers from these differing and yet increasingly related ways of knowing.
- (2) See Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's "ecofeminism" in Kemp and Squires: 1997, pp. 500-501.
- (3) Waugh: 1992, pp.130-135.
- (4) Waugh in Jackson and Jones: 1998, p.185.
- (5) For other love triangle narratives in Winterson's work see *The Passion* (1987) and *Written on the Body* (1992).
- (6) Butler insists on a subject too. In relation to how she views Haraway's philosophical ambition to transform notions of nature and things, her development of radical accounts of ecology and technology and the premise that agency is not only human, Meijer and Prins ask: "does your concept of 'object' bodies leave room to include the possibility for nonhuman bodies to come to 'matter'? Or does it remain restricted to the realm of what is 'liveable' as fully human?" Butler responds by saying that whilst she recognises the importance of Haraway and has no problem with the notion of the "actor", she still wants to work with the "subject" (*Signs* Vol. 23: 1998, pp. 285-286).
- (7) This is fully developed in *Feminism as Critique* (1987) where Benhabib gives an account of the controversy generated by Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) written in response to Lawrence Kohlberg's theories on moral development. Whilst Kohlberg's scoring system in relation to "the ethics of justice and rights" indicated that women were under-developed compared to their male counterparts he was not taking into account the difference of social situatedness, his focus was on the public rather than the private domain.
- (8) As we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, Patricia Waugh is also concerned to include an alternative feminist model of identity relating to aesthetics, psychoanalysis and autonomy theory in her work on postmodernism. Whilst not wishing to establish a theory of identity which is "exclusive to women," she would partly endorse the notion that the female experience is often a relational one and that should not be over looked. Waugh calls for a recognition that all human beings are both connected and separate, that an insistence on "separateness, impersonality, containment and pure reason" would only produce "divided and deformed human beings":

The exclusion of gender from postmodern discussions has left its theorists largely blind to the possibilities of challenging autonomy through a relational concept of identity. If women's identity has tended, broadly and allowing for differences across this, to be experienced in terms which do not necessarily see separation gained only at the expense of connection, one would expect some sense of this to be expressed in discourses other than the theoretical and psychoanalytic. Women's sense of identity is more likely, for psychological and cultural reasons, to consist of a more diffuse sense of the

boundaries of self and their notion of identity understood in relational and intersubjective terms."  
Waugh: 1993, p. 203.

- (9) Through an employment of the framework of romance narrative based on a reading of Barthes in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997) Lynne Pearce gives a reading of Winterson which traces an initial falling in love or "ravisement" with the Winterson oeuvre to a sense of loss, disappointment, grief, a falling out of love, which she experienced when she came to read *Written on the Body* [See Roland Barthes - *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978). Trans Richard Howard. Harmondsworth: Penguin]. Pearce's later essay "The Emotional Politics of Reading Winterson" (in Grice & Woods: 1998) is a revisiting of that reading. This gradual disenchantment with Winterson's work as described by Pearce is particularly relevant to my reading of the two authors as regards representations of the female body. Whereas Carter moves towards a celebratory female subject, Winterson moves away from the fantastic bodies of Villanelle in *The Passion* and Dog-Woman in *Sexing the Cherry* towards the diseased and dying body of Louise in *Written on the Body*. Certainly when I came to read this text I felt that I was reading an author to whom it was becoming more difficult to relate. I felt alienated from Winterson and at the end of this text; abandoned, cheated, confused. I was interested to find a similar response from Pearce.
- (10) Russo refers to Natalie Davis article "Women on Top" (in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1965), Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 124-152). Russo also relates the theory of the grotesque to French feminist semiotic theory whereby the female body and the maternal body are celebrated as excessively desirable. See Kristeva's account of the grotesque as parody in *The Powers of Horror* (1982) and Irigaray's parody and mimetics in *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1985).
- (11) All further references are taken from this edition.
- (12) There are echoes here with Desiderio's description of "the miraculous Albertina"; the central love-object in *The Infernal Desire of Dr Hoffman* (1972). In his introduction to this 'autobiographical' narrative, which culminates with his murder of "the inexpressible woman", Desiderio tells us "if Albertina has become for me, now, such a woman as only memory and imagination could devise, well, such is always at least partially the case with the beloved" (Carter: 1982, p13). The notion that the perfect woman is a fabrication born out of male fantasy is also a theme which is explored by Carter in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Tristessa, the Hollywood movie icon who has been the object of the transsexual Eve/lyn's desire is ultimately revealed to be male at the climax of the novel. Even at the sight of his hitherto hidden penis, Eve/lyn cannot see his fantasy as male:

I could not think of him as a man; my confusion was perfect - as perfect as the exemplary confusion of the proud, solitary heroine who now underwent the unimaginable ordeal of a confrontation with the essential aspect of its being it had so grandly abandoned, the implicit maleness it had never been able to assimilate into itself.

That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity.

Tristessa, the sensuous fabrication of the mythology of the flea-pits. How could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you? Carter: 1982, pp. 128-129.

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