SYLVIA PLATH;
A Biographical Approach.

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English

by

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The thesis of Jeffrey Heglin is approved:

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The vision in Sylvia Plath's work is an annihilistic one of surrender to death. Ariel and The Bell Jar are its matured expressions, but when considered with her lesser-known poetry, these works reflect a gradual withdrawal and present the reader with Plath's attempt to reconcile idealism in the imagination with the realities of experience. A biographical approach provides a necessary foundation to an understanding of her poetry and her vision.

Plath's major predicament is recounted in her short story, "OCEAN 1212-W." Here, at the age of three she experienced a realization of the "separateness of everything," the "objectness" or "otherness" of natural objects and animal life, as well as that of herself. No longer did she feel a total fusion with the world around her--
a "bell jar" had been placed over her.

The result was an increasing sense of rejection and alienation from the natural world, the social world of man, and the world of her own mind. Plath felt isolated in each of these three worlds. Her responses, though, were ambivalent--she wanted to be united once again on each level, but she also desired the distance because of the pain and disappointment present everywhere.

In her personal life, Plath vacillated between desire and withdrawal. She saw the positive aspects of motherhood, of being a wife, and of the life of an intellectual and poet; but she was more sensitive to the negative qualities. Too, she saw the roles as conflicting, yet she wanted each and all of them. Even men were seen as "something beautiful, but annihilating." She thus longed to have "two mutually exclusive things," but could not make an either/or choice, and instead withdrew further.

Death was eventually seen as a resolution, but this too was alluring but terrifying. Ultimately, however, the condition of anesthetized expectations and responses that she experienced in the hospital became preferred to "excitable" life, and death--the supreme state of nothingness and elimination of consciousness--became the final thrust toward dissolution.
I AM VERTICAL

But I would rather be horizontal.
I am not a tree with my root in the soil
Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularely painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.
Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,
And I want the one's longevity and the other's
daring.

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool
odours.
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping
I must most perfectly resemble them--
Thoughts gone dim.
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers
have time for me.

--Sylvia Plath
SYLVIA PLATH: A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

The writings of Sylvia Plath that most of us are familiar with are stripped, abrupt and terrifying. Her poetry in Ariel and her novel The Bell Jar are fascinating but disturbing reading, for death reflects from the corners, and sanity is a helpless toy in a world that plays serious games. Ariel and The Bell Jar are the matured expressions of a poet whose vision is a result of an unsuccessful attempt to come to terms with the idealism possible within the imagination and the harsh realities of experience that combat it. Together with her lesser-known poetry, Ariel and The Bell Jar reflect a gradual surrender to an annihilistic vision and its final response of death.

In order to understand why Plath succumbed to such a surrender, it is necessary to take a biographical approach so that there is a framework from which to examine her vision. An awareness of Plath's life is important too in criticism and analysis of her work. The poems often possess personal allusions unfamiliar to the reader, and a general awareness of how Plath tried to deal with life helps to eliminate some of the obscurity otherwise evident in many poems. A biographical approach to Plath ultimately provides an insight into why she wrote what she did, and
it enables the reader to determine for himself whether
the vision of surrender of life for death is one to be
accepted as truth, or to be rejected.

The predicament upon which her mental breakdowns and
creative responses seem to be based is stated in Plath's
autobiographical story, "OCEAN 1212-W." Her childhood to
the age of nine was spent on the Eastern seacoast with her
grandparents, parents and the mystifying and alluring sea,
and it was a life of total involvement and union with the
elements and animal life. This feeling of mutual communi-
cation ended about the age of three, when she learned
there was to be a baby added to the family. The news
seemed an intrusion on her tightly-woven world and,
sulking along the beach,

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.¹

Hurt, and conferring upon herself an imagined rejection,
she turned to the sea in hopes for something to mend the
break, to give her a sign: "A sign of what? A sign of
election and specialness. A sign I was not forever to be
cast out."²

The direction which Plath's life takes is one that

¹The Art of Sylvia Plath, A Symposium, ed. Charles

²Ibid, p. 270.
feels this separateness acutely and that becomes increasingly concerned with the "objectness" or "otherness" that this sense of separation creates. The "things of this world" no longer are felt by Plath to be in union with her, but are completely external, distant. There is no bond; there is no compassion or even interest toward the individual, and there is nowhere and no one to turn to for solace from this estrangement. Plath attempts to counterbalance and hopefully overcome this divisive sense of otherness with a positive feeling that the individual does matter in a technological age of dehumanization and depersonalization, and in an exterior world that is neutral toward man's survival.

This otherness is particularly felt with respect to nature— that is, the external world of natural objects, such as the sea in "OCEAN 1212-W," and living things. The "beautiful fusion" gives way to an awareness that the elements have no feeling toward her: "I stubbed my toe on the round, blind stones. They paid no notice. They didn't care." In "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor," sea life no longer joins in a camaraderie with her, but sees her as an invader to be viewed with suspicion:

The mussels hunt dull blue and
Conspicuous, yet it seemed
A sly world's hinges had swung

3Ibid, p. 269.
Shut against me. All held still.

...Could [the crabs] feel mud
Pleasurable under claws
As I could between bare toes?
That question ended it--I
Stood shut out, for once, for all,
Puzzling. . . .

Plath realizes that having to ask how the crabs might feel means she no longer can feel that within herself. Her estrangement from their world is thus complete, and she is shut out.

If Plath is a lurking menace and intruder to nature, nature similarly takes on the qualities of threat and danger to Plath and to mankind. Nature's grandeur and beauty are omnipresent, but its neutrality toward humanity carries with it undercurrents of inherent hostility and destructive force:

I come to wheel ruts, and water
Limpid as the solitudes
That flee through my fingers.
Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;
Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.
Of people the air only
Remembers a few odd syllables.
It rehearses them moaningly:
Black stone, black stone.

...The whole landscape
Loomed absolute as the antique world was
Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,
Unaltered by eyes,

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Enough to snuff the quick
Of her small heat out, but before the weight
Of stones and hills of stones could break
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony
light
She turned back.
("Hardcastle Crags," The Colossus, p. 16)

When one enters into nature's environment, isolated
from other people, nature can overpower and destroy. For
Plath, there is no sense of comfort, no validation of the
self or what might be termed "refreshment" of the soul
within nature. This is expressed in "Two Campers in Cloud
Country," wherein the awesomeness of the natural world
turns annihilative, and one camper seeks reassurance of
existence through the other:

[These rocks] are conceiving a dynasty of perfect
cold.
In a month we'll wonder what plates and forks are
for.
I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here.
(Crossing the Water, p. 50)

The overriding sense of separateness from nature is,
however, transcended by Plath in several poems in which
her imagination, observation and sympathy fuse into
personification, into a Keatsian "negative capability" in
which the persona becomes the object's "personality." In
an early poem, "Blue Moles," such a transfiguration is not
yet whole; rather, Plath here identifies with the two dead
moles, and sees in their small and futile lives impli-
cations for man:

Outsize hands prepare a path,
They go before: opening the veins
Delving for the appendages
Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards--to be
eaten
Over and over. And still the heaven
Of final surfeit is just as far
From the door as ever.
(The Colossus, p. 50)

In "Elm," the process is more fully developed. Plath and
the elm are essentially one; the fear and knowledge that
is portrayed in the poem is possessed by both. And, in
"Ariel," what Plath accomplishes is a total union of horse
and rider that obliterates all self-identity and plunges
them head-on toward death:

White
Godiva, I unpeel--
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

. . . And I
Am the arrow,

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

Eye, the cauldron of morning.
(Ariel, pp. 26-27)

Yet, even when one is in the company of other people
and mingling in their created world, he is aware of the
brutal reality of nature's methods that is lurking among
the shadows, there for the perceptive to see. In "Water-
color of Grantchester Meadows," for example, the external
world of nature is painted in idyllic colors, it is "a
country on a nursery plate." But beneath this superficial

loveliness is the realistic ugliness of the struggle for survival within the natural world:

... the students stroll or sit,
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love--
Black-gowned, but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.
(The Colossus, p. 41)

"Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" is exemplary also of Plath's feeling of separation from other people, and this is further seen in "Lady Lazarus," in which mass behavior is depicted as mindless and thrill-seeking--here, at the sight of the revival of a suicide attempt:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot--
The big strip tease

... It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

"A miracle!"
That knocks me out.
(Ariel, pp. 7-8)

And the same kind of objectionable mass mentality that Plath cannot associate with is insinuated in The Bell Jar in the sensational newspaper articles of Esther's disappearance and discovery which Joan, a school friend and fellow patient, shows her in the hospital.7

But "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" suggests also an alienation that is anti-intellectual, one that objects to rigid academia and oppressive intellectualism. Wendy Campbell recalls:

Sylvia felt that a drawing back in the face of any aspect of life was nothing less than horrible, a voluntary courting of deformity. It disgusted her, filled her with an angry contempt. And she saw . . . that the effect of academic pressure combined with academic ambition too often led to this kind of withdrawal; to an almost conscious sacrifice of the life of the feelings for the sake of undisturbed intellectualization.

There is in "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" a self-contained attitude of life that is "indolent" and "unaware." It is a world of ideas rather than of experience, and as such is sterile, not life-giving. It is a world that Plath seems to have both desired and rejected.

This is evidenced most predominantly in The Bell Jar. Having arrived in New York with the other giggling and bobby-soxed college girls, only Esther Greenwood is unable to remain within the aesthetic and intellectual limits she and the other girls have always known. Instead, Esther senses the alluring decadence, the danger and the pain that exists elsewhere in New York, and it creates a contrast that shows her the superficiality of their life behind the protective walls of the girls-only hotel. Esther can no longer wholly participate and feel as a

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part of this enclosed, secure world:

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes . . . drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lame bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion--everybody would think I must be having a real whirl.

(The Bell Jar, p. 2)

Instead, Esther follows Doreen, the one girl in their sheltered group who pursues the raw, sensual experiences that New York offers. Esther goes with her, for "everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones."9 But the immersion is abrupt and startling, and--in reaction to it--the decadence that was at first so appealing in Doreen becomes less magnetic, for it is not the way Esther had pictured it. She cannot commit herself wholly to this kind of life, either, and she admits it: "Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart."10

The magnetic attraction toward this way of life is never gone, however, and the result is not a return to Betsy--the paragon of the innocence and naivete of their group--and the safety she represents, but a detachment

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9The Bell Jar, p. 6.
from both Betsy's world and Doreen's. Esther cannot make an either/or choice. Now superficially part of both worlds, Esther is emotionally part of neither, and instead can only observe each behind a facade of estranged and objective participation: "I certainly learned a lot . . . even when [things happened that] surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time."\textsuperscript{11}

The effect on Plath (and Esther, her autobiographical persona) is to divide herself against herself. Desirous of living up to the expectations of herself and her society, Plath at the same time wants to see not just the beauty and perfection of life but its grimness and horror as well.\textsuperscript{12} The situation cannot be reconciled, and through Esther Plath voices that realization:

"If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days." (\textit{The Bell Jar}, p. 76)

The disruption that occurs is therefore mental, creating a feeling of a bell jar being placed over her, sealing her off from any means of reciprocal communication that might help. In \textit{The Bell Jar}, the hospital personnel, the patients, Esther's family, her boyfriend Buddy, and

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid}, p. 10.

her friends cannot seem to comprehend the basic problem 
Esther is facing, and they thereby unwittingly intensify 
both her estrangement from them and the division within 
herself. At one point, Esther is annoyed with a nurse 
for continually taking her temperature that always, of 
course, registers normal:

I wanted to tell her that if only something were wrong 
with my body it would be fine, I would rather have 
anything wrong with my body than something wrong with 
my head. . . .

(The Bell Jar, p. 149)

She cannot say it, though, for it seems of no use, and 
she remains distant and apart beneath her bell jar.

The pull between polarities causes indecision, and 
whatever direction Plath had had before is now suspended 
in stasis. Esther, for example, cannot find motivation 
to pack a suitcase, write a book, pursue school, be with 
people—simply, to decide what she wants to do. Esther 
has specific goals, but she cannot choose, and her inde-
cisiveness causes her to dangerously hesitate. She sees 
herself seated in a fig tree,

. . . starving to death because I couldn't make up my 
mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each 
and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing 
all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, 
the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by 
one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

(The Bell Jar, p. 63)

Neutrality is thus dangerous, for if it persists it can 
only lead to destruction. It is something which Plath 
cannot accept as a way of life, either: "And you, great
Stasis—/ What is so great in that!" 13

Plath is, consequently, imperiled by an isolating separation on all fronts. Feeling a lost empathy with nature, a sense of alienation from the people around her, and an inability to pull through the ensuing disorientation within herself, the "separateness of everything" creates an impassivity that is equally repellent.

One of Plath's major psychological tensions, then, is threat and fear generated from this sense of distance and otherness. In A Closer Look at Ariel, Plath's college friend Nancy Steiner relates:

Even minor pain seemed the final, intolerable straw that could topple her flimsy defenses. The pain generated fear, exposing a hidden level of reality where she was most vulnerable.

(p. 74)

What is so greatly feared is life, essentially the daily life of normal mental health and its routines and habits that, for Plath, are paralyzing. By feeling detached, there is then nothing to turn to for solace or revitalization. Esther discovers this in The Bell Jar, for the hospital staff is depicted as unfeeling, if not a little mad themselves, and therefore of no help. One nurse talks to Esther about another patient, and

. . . with a large, conspiratorial grin [she] hissed, as if to reassure me, "She thinks she's going to jump out the window but she can't jump out the window

13"Years," Ariel, p. 72.
because they're all barred!"
(The Bell Jar, p. 117)

The psychiatrist that Esther's mother has her see is also demonstrative of the normal, sane world's inability--or unwillingness--to truly understand and help those who are having difficulty with life. Dr. Gordon is an attractive young man, and to Esther his office, like his personality, generates normalcy, right down to the posed, perfect-family portrait on the desk that is placed halfway between Esther and Dr. Gordon with the casual preciseness of normalcy. Normal mental health rings hollow and condescending: "What did I think was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong."¹⁴

From his austere and safe position of sanity, Dr. Gordon prescribes shock treatment, and by doing so strengthens the insinuation that to the normal world it is not life that has done wrong, but those who think it has. Indeed, feeling the electricity jolt through her body, Esther wonders "what terrible thing it was that I had done."¹⁵

There is then, in Plath's mind, some justification for feeling that life is a threat, and for fearing the familiar world of health--in the end it is hypocritical,

¹⁴The Bell Jar, p. 106.
¹⁵Ibid, p. 118.
purporting to understand when actually it terrifies and, for Plath, creates and perpetuates her alienation. This is seen in "The Stones," wherein hospitals are like factories, and the body is composed of reparable and even replaceable parts:

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mending itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.
(The Colossus, p. 84)

Reconstruction of the body or "vase" back to health may be possible; reconstruction of the emotions or "rose," this suggests, is not so easy, if at all possible or even desirable.

Daily life too outside of hospitals is not without its fears, though here it is the routine of daily existence that bores and slowly festers into uneasiness and a feeling that life is not worth it. As such, daily life does not and cannot restore normalcy. In "Lesbos," this is seen throughout by a woman annoyed, trapped and containedly terrified by the impotence and uselessness she sees in routine living, her baby and her neighbors:

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors----
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
(Ariel, p. 30)
It is a sham, but it is all there is, and it is "windowless"--there is no fresh air that can restore her.

"Lesbos" reveals, from this standpoint, the conflict within Plath between the standardized role of housewifery and the current movement of feminism. Plath's desire for "two mutually exclusive" goals seems to have been also true with respect to the role of wife and mother and the role of a poet and an intellectual. Her efficiency at both were always in evidence to her friends. Wendy Campbell recollects that

Sylvia had a sort of natural excellence at whatever she turned her hand to. If she wrote an essay it was effortlessly good, if she kept house it was done easily and well, and she even cooked superbly.

I was interested to see the calm affectionate pleasure with which Sylvia dealt with Frieda [her baby daughter]. Once more the lack of fuss, the efficiency, the collectedness.

(The Art of Sylvia Plath, pp. 184, 185)

But Plath's efficiency was not an end desirable in itself so much as it was a means by which she attempted to reconcile the pull toward marriage and family with the pull toward a writing career. The outward effect may have been one of ease and naturalness, but it was little more than a defense in a pessimistic vision that saw fear and pain on all sides, including her confidence in herself.

In The Bell Jar, Esther returns from New York slipping more and more rapidly away from involvement and purpose. She would like to communicate, but her voice sounds to her
like a zombie, a dybbuk; her letters when she writes grow large and childlike and nearly illegible; words in books only torment her by sliding around on the pages and rearranging in senseless symbols. She attempts to write a novel, but this too is ineffective, for, she realizes,

I needed experience.
How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for a short story about her adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing?
(The Bell Jar, p. 99)

The mental division within Plath includes this sense of ineffectuality as a writer. The poems in her first published volume, The Colossus, are formally precise, the words sometimes mandarin, though effective. The overall effect, as John Nims suggests, is that the poems are an intellectual exercise in formal construction.16 They seem to have been easily written when such, in fact, was not always the case. Plath was known for her laborious perusal through the thesaurus, picking out words exact in both sound and meaning.17 The resulting poems, however carefully constructed, nevertheless do not always possess that spark of life considered so essential to good poetry.

That Plath was disconcertedly aware of this and its


17Ted Hughes, "The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 188. Also see Nancy Steiner, p. 74.
reverberations is presented forthrightly in her poem "Stillborn." Here, Plath laments the compassionate intensity of concentration, the "mother-love," which she has put into her poetry but that, she feels, simply is unable to produce poems that have vitality. They say nothing; they are stillborn:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis. They grew their toes and fingers well enough, Their little foreheads bulged with concentration. If they missed out on walking about like people It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot understand what happened to them! They are proper in shape and number and every part. They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid! They smile and smile and smile and smile at me. And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish, Though they have a piggy and a fishy air-- It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were. But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction, And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her. (Crossing the Water, p. 35)

There is the suggestion, in the "pickling fluid," that she herself is to blame for their stillbirth. If they do not live, it is because they were created and then sustained in a lifeless atmosphere.

Plath desired the ability to pursue at once both the scholarly life as well as the expected and traditional role of wife and mother. In a letter about a female instructor of hers in England, Plath remarked that she was grateful evidence that a woman did not necessarily
have to "sacrifice all claims to femininity & family to be a scholar!" But such an ability is possible only when there is emotional stability. Plath, as already seen, did not have this, and could not therefore weave the two objectives into one fabric, however much she wanted to.

If her doubt in her ability as a writer caused her frustration, the role of wife and mother was no less discouraging. "I can't be a drudge, the way housewives are forced to be here," she wrote from England, and her poetry and The Bell Jar reflect the distaste for and disappointed separation from this role. In "Lesbos," the drudgery is bluntly put in terms of the "crap and puke and cry" that is a part of raising infants. The neighbor wife is quickly drawn as an objectionable product of the housewife's life. Her talk is disconnected and meaningless, and has no substance for Plath:

You say your husband is just no good to you.
His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl.
You have one baby, I have two.
I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.

But:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.

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19Ibid, pp. 171-172.
20Ibid, p. 166.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.  
\textit{(Ariel, pp. 30-31)}

Humdrum daily life is oppressive and stifling. The monotony of routine exhibited by the neighbor's chatter lulls Plath seductively, and provides a stagelike atmosphere that fools and creates an illusion of worthwhileness. But there is lurking terror as well, for the neighbor wife is also attempting a sexual seduction. There is no real escape for Plath, and she must adopt the lies and false appearances in order to sustain herself in an equilibriu. But to do so within such a paralyzing and frightening existence requires withdrawal through sedatives.

In "Zoo Keeper's Wife," whatever positive or simply romantic notion of fulfillment there may be in being a wife is stripped away. Here, a wife is but a lump beside her husband, even after a fascinating and promising courtship. Her womanhood is left to rot while her husband sleeps:

\begin{verbatim}
I can stay awake all night, if need be--
Cold as an eel, without eyelids.
Like a dead lake the dark envelops me,
Blueblack, a spectacular plum fruit.
No airbubbles start from my heart, I am lungless
And ugly, my belly a silk stocking
Where the heads and tails of my sisters decompose.
\textit{(Crossing the Water, p. 58)}
\end{verbatim}

In \textit{The Bell Jar}, Esther contemplates the desirability of the anonymity and simplemindedness of such a life away from scholastic pressures. She imagines a phony name and
what it would be like in a life cut off from academic reglementation and the pressure and frustration it creates:

I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway.

(The Bell Jar, p. 108)

But Dodo Conway--mother of seven who raises her children amidst toys, squabbles, Rice Krispies and peanut butter sandwiches--and her simple, oblivious way of life is, in the end, unsatisfactory and unfulfilling to Esther, even though Dodo, she admits, "interested me in spite of myself."21

This same fascination with, yet withdrawal from, motherhood is seen too in the poems "Morning Song" and "Childless Woman." In "Morning Song," Plath performs the necessary obligations of a mother, but it is as though she is not the mother at all. Her disassociation from the baby and their life as a unit makes her view it from outside, as though with no feeling:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements. . . .

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. . . .

And now you try

21The Bell Jar, p. 95.
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons.  
( _Ariel_, p. 1)

To be without children, however, is a condition that Plath seems to have looked upon with some distress, as in "Childless Woman." Menstruation without fruition is but a barren cycle, and its effects on a woman wanting children is similarly barren and even alienating:

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

My landscape is a hand with no lines,  
The roads bunched to a knot,  
The knot myself. . . .

The indecisions in evidence here seems to emanate from the imperfections or "realities" of a baby as well as the grim and very real conditions into which a baby is born in this modern era. In "Child" is all the contention Plath seems to have felt between the idea of a baby and the reality of a baby, and of being born into a troubled world:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with colour and ducks,  
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate--  
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,  
Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

---

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

(Winter Trees, p. 12)

The realness of the baby disturbs her, does not fit in with the "grand and classical" idea of a baby. Nor does the baby's future seem to hold any hope, for to Plath it is starless and without hope or meaning.

The role of wife and mother, then, was one which Plath liked the thought of idealistically but could not come to terms with because of the drudgery and vacuous staleness it harbored. A similar contention exists concerning the role of husband or, more generally, the male and his traditional role in our culture. Here again, Plath seems to have desired two opposites at one and the same time--the "virile, but tender" male who would understand her through emotions, and the male whose understanding rested in reason. Neither one, ultimately, proves satisfactory.

Buddy, in The Bell Jar, approaches Esther intellectually, not on the emotional level in which she needs help. His "courtship"--if it is even that--is abortive for, because he is never able, and probably unwilling, to feel Esther's emotions, he never approaches an understanding of her intellectually. Esther as woman is only a projection of his male ego, one which should reflect his image back like a mirror. It does not, of course.
Consequently, Buddy does not and cannot comprehend Esther's genuine problem of dealing with life, but instead wants only reassurance that he is not responsible for her breakdown and hospitalization, as well as the suicide of Joan, Esther's fellow patient and Buddy's girlfriend before Esther. When he gets such reassurance, the matter is of no more consequence, for the failure is not his, but theirs. His ego remains intact:

"You had nothing to do with us, Buddy."
"You're sure?"
"Absolutely."
"Well," Buddy breathed. "I'm glad of that."
And he drained his tea like a tonic medicine.  
(The Bell Jar, p. 196)

Dr. Gordon, Esther's psychiatrist, similarly approaches her on an intellectual rather than emotional level. For him, Esther is not a human being with real problems, but an abstract symbol. Esther cannot discuss her problems with him because he exudes self-complacent normalcy, and her inability to talk with Dr. Gordon goes unnoticed by him. Instead, she is merely a reminder to him of his former days with the WAC station on her college campus:

"Yes, a WAC station, I remember now. I was doctor for the lot, because I was sent overseas. My, they were a pretty bunch of girls."
(The Bell Jar, p. 107)

This same tendency to objectify a woman and disregard her feelings is particularly evident in the character of Irwin, the tall and bespectacled young man with whom...
Esther has her first sexual encounter. Esther's anticipation and expectation as to what sex will be like are quickly destroyed:

I lay, rapt and naked, on Irwin's rough blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt. But all I felt was a sharp, startlingly bad pain. "It hurts," I said. "Is it supposed to hurt?"

Irwin didn't say anything. Then he said, "Sometimes it hurts."23

What follows is a nightmarish severe hemorrhaging that totally obliterates any remaining sense of fulfillment within sexual union. Throughout the situation, Irwin does not really take any responsibility for what has happened, but only wants to know when he will see Esther again. Little wonder that, in "Zoo Keeper's Wife," the husband is depicted as unresponsive and detestable:

Should I stir, I think this pink and purple plastic Guts bag would clack like a child's rattle,
Old grievances jostling each other, so many loose teeth.
But what do you know about that
My fat pork, my marrowy sweetheart, face-to-the wall?
Some things of this world are indigestible.
(Crossing the Water, p. 58)

Looked upon as an object by men, woman eventually sees herself in the same light, as Plath does in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" that portrays the wife as a conglomeration of plastic and mindless body parts. In "The Applicant," too, woman is a commodity whose own needs are ignored in

23This is taken from an actual incident in Plath's life, and is discussed by Nancy Steiner, pp. 58-71.
favor of the male ego and its requirements for fulfillment:

Naked as paper to start
But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
(Ariel, p. 5)

The idea of romantic love that Plath invests in Esther cannot and does not survive the physical realities of love. Love may have its joy and ecstasy, but it also has its suffering, and Plath seems more keenly sensitive to this painful aspect and the fear it was able to invoke. It threatens with emptiness and hurt, as seen in "Elm":

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

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.
(Ariel, pp. 15, 16)

Love is thus not idyllic but a bizarre condition of victim and oppressor in a sado-masochistic relationship in which the woman is in the persecuted role. This is perhaps best depicted in the scene with Marco in The Bell Jar, who calls Esther and all women sluts and beats her because "Yes or no, it is all the same." The portent of danger is present from the very beginning. Yet, though Esther
obviously senses what may happen, she can do little about it:

Marco's small, flickering smile reminded me of a snake I'd teased in the Bronx Zoo. When I tapped my finger on the stout cage glass the snake had opened its clockwork jaws and seemed to smile. Then it struck and struck and struck at the invisible pane till I moved off.

I had never met a woman-hater before.  
(The Bell Jar, pp. 86-87)

There is an underlying sense that Esther also does not altogether want to get out of the situation for, though potentially injurious both psychologically and physically, there is a regard of fascination toward this hate-in-love situation and toward the male, in whom lies the antithetic qualities of at once "something beautiful, but annihilating," as Plath states in "The Rival."24 And in "Daddy," love and hate are fused in a mutually dependent relationship:

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you. . . .

I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
(Ariel, pp. 50, 51)

But if there is vulnerability and dependency on the

24 It is the same kind of duality which Plath sees in the sea, and the sea is generally depicted by her as male rather than female. See Edward Lucie-Smith, "Sea-Imagery in the Work of Sylvia Plath," The Art of Sylvia Plath, pp. 91-99.
part of the woman in this pendulous relationship, such also exists within the male. In "The Jailor," for example, the husband's role is brutal and suppressive, and the persona's role is as a resistant but captive prisoner who objects, but cannot and perhaps does not really want to escape. At the same time, there is an awareness on her part that as such she is also a necessity, for without her in this kind of relationship, the husband would be destroyed:

I imagine him
Impotent as distant thunder,
In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
I wish him dead or away.
That it seems is the impossibility,

That being free. What would the dark
Do without fevers to eat?
What would the light
Do without eyes to knife, what would he
Do, do, do without me?25

The historical imagery of Nazi Germany used in "Daddy" raises this victim and oppressor relationship from the interpersonal level to implicate the same kind of diseased condition throughout human nature and history. It is a pessimistically realistic attitude toward human potential, one in which the "healthy" state is not that at all. The world is alienated and alienating, creating a similar cyclical and self-perpetuating condition in the individual. Withdrawal is perhaps the safest response to

such a world; within detachment is a kind of purity and an escape into a more possible attainment of perfection.

This is what Esther is reaching out for when she takes hot baths to dissolve from her mind and body the stifling and harsh realities she encounters in New York City:

"I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure."

The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby.

(The Bell Jar, p. 17)

And sleep, too, provides a retreat that is white, blank and noncommittal: "And the door took her place like a sheet of blank paper, and then a larger sheet of paper took the place of the door, and I drifted toward it and smiled myself to sleep."26

There is thus safety from pain and fear in the non-feeling of no commitments. As such, there is also a purifying or purgative quality to a reaction of disassociation from the world. In "Suicide Off Egg Rock," this withdrawal seems justifiable, for the world as presented is dirty and insensitive and has no concern toward the individual anyway. Suicide seems a reasonable alternative:

26The Bell Jar, p. 38.
Behind him the hotdogs split and drizzled
On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,
Gas tanks, factory stacks--that landscape
Of imperfections his bowels were part of--
Ripped and pulsed in the glassy updraft.
Sun struck the water like a damnation. . . .

Everything glittered like blank paper.

Everything shrank in the sun's corrosive
Ray but Egg Rock on the blue wastage.
He heard when he walked into the water
The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.
(The Colossus, pp. 35, 36)

The "imperfections" from which the persona is escaping are
not only those of the world around him, but the inherent
imperfectibility of life itself. In death, Plath is
saying, is the total escape, the ultimate purity and
whiteness of perfection.

Yet this is an equally frightening alternative to
the terror that is life, and the use of the image of the
hospital reflects Plath's vacillation between the two--
between fearing and wanting life, and fearing and wanting
death. It is apparent throughout The Bell Jar, wherein
the hospital is an antiseptic environment. The psychi-
tric treatment that is given uses no insight and has no
sympathy for the emotional problems of the patients, but
anesthetizes and further alienates the patients from the
real world. From a supposedly superior plateau of
"health" and paradoxical lack of sympathy and under-
standing, the hospital staff does not help the patients
toward resensitization. Rather, patients are sedated and
given shock treatments to eliminate feeling altogether.

Esther is only able to be aroused out of this kind of annihilation through the exceptional understanding of Dr. Nolan and the suicide of Joan, which jolts her back into a realization that she is alive, and that life can have meaning:

Joan's parents invited me to the funeral. . . .
"I'll go," I said, and I did go, and all during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying. . . .
I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am.
(The Bell Jar, pp. 198, 199)

But though The Bell Jar ends on such a note, there is nevertheless present a pessimism that there will be a return of the bell jar to smother her. And, indeed, the poetry indicates a growing acceptance and eventual yearning for this annihilation of feeling and, ultimately, of life altogether. In "Apprehensions," there is a sense of restlessness or irritation toward the indifference and the numbing quality within a hospital and the uncaring macrocosm outside:

There is this white wall, above which the sky creates itself—
Infinite, green, utterly untouchable.
Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also.
They are my medium.
The sun dissolves on this wall, bleedings its lights.

A grey wall now, clawed and bloody.
Is there no way out of the mind?
(Crossing the Water, p. 57)
What the persona wants to eliminate is the mental suffering and alienation that he feels both the hospital and the world are inflicting upon him. Yet, rather than reject this nonfeeling, he gradually accepts its positive attributes, and resistance ends. Forgetfulness and withdrawal from feeling are seen as the answer, as the way out of the mind and its confining boundaries of sensibility and disappointment.

In "Amnesiac," the patient is pleased with what has happened to him and likes the total erasure of his past and his problems. He is only desirous now of maintaining this state of mind, not overcoming it:

No use, no use, now, begging Recognize!
There is nothing to do with such a beautiful blank
but smooth it.

O, sister, mother, wife,
Sweet Lethe is my life.
I am never, never, never coming home!27

Like the patient in "Amnesiac," the patient in "Tulips" tries to reject memory of and associations with the real world, and is intent instead on withdrawing and forgetting, attempting to approach instead a mental state that has no suffering and no pain:

How free it is, you have no idea how free--
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.

(Ariel, p. 11)

The gift of tulips, however, disrupts the purity of the emptiness and, like the photograph of her family that is put in her room, it reminds her who she is and the anguish and despair she is attempting to get away from:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds . . .

They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.
(Ariel, p. 11)

By intruding upon her attention, the tulips act to revive her mental and physical sensory abilities, and she slowly, if unwillingly, begins to emerge back to the realm of feeling and health:

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves. . . .
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.
(Ariel, p. 12)

But the "excitable" life that finds its symbol in the vivid redness and mere presence of the tulips is nonetheless undesirable. Plath turned from and finally rejected it. The peacefulness of the erased mind and its numbness to sensations is, as Plath states in "Tulips," "what the dead close on, finally." In death there is a serenity that even an anesthetized life does not totally possess, for it is still a physical entrapment of the
soul, a holding back of the final thrust toward dissolution. Death becomes the ultimate answer, for in it the outer casing, the "bell jar" inhibiting the soul from union with nothingness or nirvana, is removed, and the mind is forever released, as in "Getting There":

And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.

(Ariel, p. 38)

That such a release from burdens into blankness and purity might not occur through death was an idea disruptive to Plath's direction of thinking. In A Closer Look at Ariel, Nancy Steiner recalls Plath's own remarks on her attempted suicide:

The strangest part of the suicide attempt was regaining consciousness in the hospital. I don't believe in God or in an afterlife, and my first reaction when I opened my eyes was "No, it can't be. There can't be anything after death." I was terribly disappointed that even death couldn't put an end to my consciousness.28

The desire for death is a desire for obliteration of suffering and mental anguish. It is a release; it is the supreme separation from people, the world, and the sensations of the "wall of skin" objected to in "OCEAN 1212-W."

Plath's creative expression seems to be predicated

28Nancy Steiner, p. 45. She also mentions the fact that Plath had once sought to have a lobotomy, but her psychiatrist told her she was not about to "get off so easy."
upon a sense of isolation, a recognition of otherness in such a way that encourages alienation. This, to Plath, was present on the various levels of man's interaction—\*with the natural world around him, with other members of his society, and with his own mind. Everywhere Plath found, if not rejection, then indifference, a depersonalizing neutrality toward the individual that, at least for her, generated and perpetuated an increasing alienation and withdrawal. She desired, as in "Years," the fusion with nature and mankind that results from interaction and involvement:

O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.
Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.

What I love is
The piston in motion—
My soul dies before it.
And the hooves of the horse,
Their merciless churn.

(Ariel, p. 72)

But the distinct otherness and the feeling of isolation are insurmountable, and the gradual and final step toward total estrangement is a vision in which the "vacuous black" becomes a desired goal—death becomes a freeing from captive isolation and restraint. At the same time, death paradoxically becomes the means not only through which separation is finalized, but total union is at least achieved, as in "I Am Vertical":

---
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers
have time for me.
(Ariel, p. 26)

In death is that resolution of the longing to join "two
mutually exclusive things."

The reality of isolation in our present technological
environment is without question, although the extent of
its pervasiveness rests, ultimately, on one's own point of
view. Plath seems to have been hypersensitive to it, and
reacted accordingly. She possessed, as Wendy Campbell
recalls,

...a bitter grief and resentment at the pain involved
in being human, for herself and (by identification) for
the rest of humanity. She could neither tolerate the
pain herself, nor bear it for anyone else. It seems
that an acceptance of the fact of pain is necessary for
survival. The digestion of that excruciating fact is
the price of survival.29

In her last year, Plath suffered from recurrent
emotional and physical exhaustion in one of London's
coldest winters.30 It is understandable how these con-
ditions could intensify a belief already held that in
death lie freedom and peace from a threatening, endan-
gering indifference and an hostility that exist in the
external world of nature and the social world of man.
For Plath, both worlds were alluring but deadly, and the

29 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 186.
vision in her poetry and *The Bell Jar* reflect the simultaneous feelings of fascination and terror she felt toward them. It is a vision that, if embraced, can and will annihilate, as her own suicide testifies to. Sylvia Plath must be, then, not an answer but a lesson.
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