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It Seemed a Lucky Thing: The Self as Art in the Work of Sylvia Plath

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by
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Chapter 1

Introduction, a Survey of the Situation

When *Ariel* was originally published after Sylvia Plath's death, Ted Hughes, her husband, had rearranged the order of the original copy's contents, and removed some of its included poems. When *The Bell Jar* was published in America, Aurelia Plath published *Letters Home*, a collection of all of Sylvia's letters to her mother, and in response to this collection, one that was approved for publishing by him, Hughes published *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. He found that the letters gave a false image, and thought that Sylvia's journals may help alleviate that false image. However, he also admits to destroying a portion of her journals, allegedly to protect his children, and so they are lost to us forever. Hughes criticized Ronald Hayman's interpretations of some of Plath's work as too literal, then turned on those of Jacqueline Rose for her more abstract readings. Seemingly, Ted sees "*Ariel* as the tiny nugget of gold extracted from the ore of a painfully misdirected writing life," Sylvia as "a high-art poet," and any interpretations or views that reject that or create a tension with it are false. (176) However, why exactly Hughes went through such lengths has no clear answer beyond speculation. The effect, whether intentional or not, is the appearance of attempting to carefully construct how Plath appears to readers, either biographically, as we have seen, or via her creative works. With the example of Jacqueline Rose, we are given insight into another construction of who Plath was that isn't centered around Ted Hughes's version of her. The poem in question is "Rabbit Catcher", which was actually one of the poems Hughes removed from the *Ariel* manuscript. Rose found a "fantasy of androgyny" (178) in her reading, a kind of imagined homosexuality by Plath. Hughes

protests this reading primarily because of damages it may have on his children's perception of their mother. Rose suggests that she was "in no sense speaking of Plath's lived sexual identity", only that she was discussing "fantasy." (180) However, what she goes on to say plays a great importance in the discussion to come:

> But [Ted] says that the distinction is not viable, because the fantasy concerns very intimate aspects of their life. It's true, it is intimate and it is private. But if you cannot talk about fantasy in a discussion of the literary writings of Sylvia Plath, then you cannot talk about Sylvia Plath. Because that's what she writes about. About the psyche and about the inner images. Wonderful inner images of difficulty and pain--images which implicate us all, I think. (180)

This is in itself a construction of Plath, one not grounded in biography or lived experience, but one in the literary work itself. Whether something is strictly true given a writer's life doesn't necessarily mean it cannot be a component of their work. But, I would suggest it's somewhat impossible to not attach the lived experience to Plath's work because of Rose's points. It is so intrinsic to her writing, such an area of power, that it seems practically illogical to leave it on the wayside. But how do we reconcile this issue? How can we see things that are there in literature, that weren't really there in life? It is these questions that, when put in conjunction with the work of Sylvia Plath, offer both thrilling and confounding results.

Plath appeared to all she knew as preppy, beaming, youthful, intelligent beyond her years and talented beyond most people's dreams. She was the spitting image, with the exception perhaps of her intellect, of a traditional all-American girl. This was at least up until her first suicide attempt. Impressions of her character and personality have become *the* substance of Plath discourse. Memoirs of mere acquaintances, biographical forays, and even lawsuits have emerged as a method by which the figure of Plath has been shaped, or at least attempted to be shaped or pulled in various directions, towards various stakes that may be had in the details of her life and

the meanings of her work by what has amounted to a variety of factions. There's the Hughes Estate, which adamantly protects Ted Hughes, who had been married to Plath, and fights against analysis of her work that isn't conducive to their approved reading. Then there's the biographical community, which seeks to dig into the life of Plath, and encounters the power of her work, that it blends so seamlessly into that life. And then there is the readership of Plath, those who pick various sides, are swayed one way or another, but could largely be categorized as those who see Plath as a kind of tortured artist, a martyr, and in that process vilify the Hughes Estate, and more specifically Ted Hughes. The product of these various voices in the discourse is a distinct confusing, a thick veil over the figure of Plath, so much so that the figure in question is unclear. There is a phantom, a myth, various constructions of who she *may* have been, what people *want* her to be.

Shrouded in as much mystery as the subject itself, is the medium by which these controversies are communicated. Biographical work in particular has complicated and rather infuriating tendencies, the cornerstones being the subjectivity of the respective authors and the carefully curated process that is mandatory for any Plath biographer. In her work *The Silent Woman,* Janet Malcolm takes up the task of a Plath biography, but with a more genre-oriented goal than one centered around Plath. The book serves mostly as a perspective on biographical work itself, the role of the biographer, and surveys the Plath situation rather than details her life. Malcolm's points themselves, and her dealings with the Hughes Estate, are of particular interest when discussing the complications that have enthralled the discourse of Plath.

When I refer to "the Hughes Estate", I think primarily of Olwyn Hughes, Ted Hughes' sister, who generally acted, up until recently when control over permissions was given to Faber

& Faber, as the gatekeeper to Plath biographers, i.e. the decider of who can use Plath's work. A few written attestments to the influence, at times negative, at others a kind of chaotic-neutral, almost never purely positive, of the stranglehold on the biographical process that the Plath Estate has had are the biographies of Anne Stevenson, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Malcolm. With the exception of Malcolm, each has felt the Hughesian hand tighten its grip. Stevenson more than anyone, whose situation is discussed at length within Malcolm's book.

Stevenson's plight is no better summarized than in the comments of Olwyn Hughes, "Let's face it, Anne was a mistake." (Malcolm, 45) Olwyn takes on a tone of almost amusingly harsh contempt in the pages of *The Silent Woman*, characterizing Stevenson as a "little poet", a "little literary lady", and a "little writer", belittling not only her work but her capability as an intellectual. Olwyn regrets she "...didn't get somebody brighter… Sylvia was an intellectual--Anne is not," stating she "had to nanny her along" (Malcolm, 45) during the process of her biography, *Bitter Fame*. This contempt, however, is not exclusive to Olwyn Hughes. The wider community of Plath readers has, and still, identifies Stevenson's book as a 'bad book'. To them, she didn't *push* enough, she was too careful about the personal lives she might intrude upon or otherwise damage with her revealing information. In the community's eye a "biographer's business… is to satisfy the reader's curiosity, not to place limits on it." (10) There aren't issues within biography itself, rather there are simply biographers that are "bad guys." However, this is a gross oversimplification. When the gatekeeper of all Plath's work, who also has vested interest in the image of a *central* component of Plath's life, suggests that she has had to "nanny" a biographer along, one can't help but wonder what exactly 'nannying along' looks

like? As it happens, it really means providing heavy resistance to any point of view *not* belonging to her own. The writing of *Bitter Fame* saw intense and suffocating supervision:

> Anne and Olwyn were locked in mortal, uneven combat over the book. Anne's attempts to reclaim it--to be the author of her own book--were unsuccessful; she had lost control of the text when she made her devil's pact with Olwyn. Olwyn maintained her iron grip. Anne was always forced to retreat, compromise, give up something she wanted to use, put in something she wanted to leave out. (Malcolm, 78)

Being manipulated in this way is not an uncommon occurrence in Plath biographies. Linda Wagner-Martin met similar resistance, in a biography that, in its current form, was a strong case of objective biographical writing:

> As Olwyn read the later chapters of the book, however, and particularly after she read a draft of the manuscript in 1986, her cooperation diminished substantially. Olwyn wrote me at great length, usually in argument with my views about the life and development of Plath. Ted Hughes responded to a reading of the manuscript in draft form in 1986 with suggestions for changes that filled fifteen pages and would have meant a deletion of more 15,000 words. (Wagner-Martin, 14)

The result of not complying with most pressures of the Hugheses would be a removal of permissions, which would significantly damage the ability of a biographer to do thorough and compelling work.[1] Manuscripts would face heavy objections from both Olwyn and Ted Hughes, and it would often seem "that permissions would be granted only if [one] agreed to change the manuscript to reflect the Hugheses' points of view." (14) In Wagner-Martin's case, this pressure eventually resulted in her simply cutting off conversation with the Hugheses, as, in her words, the only other option would be to accommodate changes that would alter "the point of view of [the] book appreciably." (14) The consequence of this, is that *Sylvia Plath*, Wagner-Martin's book, contains much less of Plath's work and material than she had originally intended.

[1] This is an intriguing statement, and one that is addressed with the greater content of this paper. Why is it that the ability to create a thorough biographical work when it comes to Plath requires the ability to read her poems?

This confession comes from Wagner-Martin's preface, and in a similar fashion Anne Stevenson attempted some kind of explanation for the failings of her work in her author's note. However, even Stevenson's small attempt at absolution was unable to avoid the influence of Olwyn. Her galley copies were sent out containing the note, "This biography of Sylvia Plath is the result of a three-year dialogue between the author and Olwyn Hughes, agent to the Plath Estate. Ms. Hughes has contributed so liberally to the text that this is in effect a work of joint authorship," (Malcolm, 12) which suggests that the book was more of a partner project, and accurately, if not in a politely-aggressive way, notes the heavy edits and, perhaps, 'nannying' of Olwyn. However, this was unacceptable. After being threatened to have her permissions withdrawn, Stevenson swapped the above note with a new one, "which encourages the reader to believe that the book appeared after Olwyn's revisions and improvements had been gratefully received." (79) The question becomes, what exactly is so dangerous? What needs to be so aggressively protected? Or what status quo needs to be maintained?

In an amusingly frustrating twist, Malcolm, whom I've used as a guide of sorts for exploring biography's demons, delivers a sucker punch to the hopeful heart herself. In her afterword, she makes note of misleading/false information she gives earlier in the book. Apparently, Hughes's decision to publish *The Bell Jar* in America had much less to do with any monetary or property gain, but rather to maintain rights of the book. From a letter Ted Hughes sent to Malcolm:

> What happened was: Some time in 1970, Fran McCullough discovered that works published abroad but not in the U.S. by a U.S. citizen who then dies, goes out of copyright in the U.S. seven years after the author's death. Fran wrote to us--a letter of high urgency and alarm. Unless *The Bell Jar* was published instantly in the U.S., in some new form (with a slight physical difference from the British edition), and the U.S.

> copyright thus established--then, etc. Some other publisher, Fran told us, was already planning to pirate it (which is how she came to hear about the loophole. (Malcolm, 210)

He then goes on to explain how he communicated this with Aurelia Plath, and how after a "flurry of communications" Aurelia accepted the inevitability. It was agreed that it was best that they hold the rights to Plath's work than anyone else. Of course, we can't help but wonder how something like this happens, and the answer to that question is one of, frankly, perplexing negligence. In an annotation on Aurelia's letter discussing the piece of real estate there had been an annotation written by Aurelia herself. At the time, Malcolm read it as "Ted [illegible] bought the property", and it was only in this moment after most was said and done that she put a bit more effort into discerning exactly what that said. Asking a librarian to look at the letter and see if she could make it out, the annotation revealed itself, presumably, to say "Ted *never* bought the property." (Malcolm, 213)

This certainly throws a wrench into the whole operation doesn't it? For a moment spanning roughly 200 pages, we felt as though Hughes was our villain. We needed a slimy mercenary profiting off his dead wife's work, but we are given a man who wants to be able to fully control, and potentially fully protect, his wife's work, and as such her image. This, of course, does not stop the inferring, it does not halt the constructions of the mind. We will take our villain regardless of if all the facts add up, or we will take the sympathizable husband with the same disregard for consistency. Perhaps this was the point Malcolm was trying to make in leaving this to her afterword, however, I can't shake the thought that even in Malcolm's work, in which she states her siding with the Hugheses, she reads Aurelia's annotation as damning Ted's character, rather than potentially saving it. Biography, in use to discern a specific and concrete image of Sylvia Plath, is futile. What we are given are subjective takes from highly polarized

sides, and information that is hidden, at times inaccessible, and at times simply denied. The process itself subjects one to constant pressure, as Anne Stevenson and Linda Wagner-Martin experienced, and in the end, what has truly been revealed? What has truly been clarified? The whole situation is so horribly disfigured, and so disturbingly unclear.

I wonder what Sylvia Plath, if she was rendered a conscious entity observing her post-mortem mysteries from some ethereal plane, would comment on all this. She, while alive, had the suspicion that she was capable of some level of precognition, and "Lady Lazarus" offers something so hauntingly close to Rasputin-esque prediction, I am inclined to consider it, at least, possible. Plath, in the lines of the poem, has moments of truly curious and haunting relevancy to the controversy surrounding her.

> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart-
> It really goes
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge,
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood

These two stanzas bring to mind a type of commercial exchange. That "there is a charge" for pieces of the speaker, whether they be "scars", the "heart", or "a bit of blood". Also accompanied by a price are the object oriented "eyeing" and "touch." We could read this as a metaphorical burning of those who interact with the speaker, but in reading it as a transaction of sorts we are quickly reminded of the royalties the Hugheses receive upon sales of Plath's work, of the many friends, family and acquaintances of Plath who have *all* published memoirs about her, of the biographers who have ransacked her private journals, letters, and very life to add another shadow against the wall. This avenue, however, may not be quite as simple as that. "Lady Lazarus"

utilizes death and the corpse a fair bit, and while it can be read in the same commercial sense established thus far, there is also horror in the body itself rather than the action around it:

> Peel of the napkin
> O my enemy.
> Do I terrify?-
>
> The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
> The sour breath
> Will vanish in a day.
>
> Soon, soon the flesh
> The grave cave ate will be
> At home on me

If we are to highlight a strength of Plath's, undoubtedly it is the articulation of death and decay. While there is certainly a great deal to pay attention to in these three stanzas, we will stick to the haunting premonition theme, as this poem will be returned to in much greater detail in Chapter 4. The speaker is addressing what she calls her "enemy", a body of evil, of opposition, someone not representing the interests of the 'good.' This enemy is interacting with a corpse, and one that resistant to being revealed. "Peel" suggests a clinging, a resistance to removal, and that what is being concealed *terrifies* implies it was hidden for a reason. The rot, death, and otherwise uninviting body is not meant to be looked at or observed, even less so sold off and bid for as is later suggested.

An interesting detail lay in the line "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?" and their relation to "terrify." It's suggested that they are a horrifying set of attributes. While it is important to note that there is no way we can strictly say the speaker in this poem is Plath, the line can be fairly easily related to her own appearance. While perhaps slightly exaggerated, photos of her certainly can check these boxes if looked at with a slightly scornful eye. I don't see

this as a coincidence, especially in reading the poem this way. It is exceptionally combative against typical notions of speaker/author separation, and I suggest that this is the very purpose. Not, of course, in an assertion of Plath as a psychic of some kind, rather that she *knew* of this scenario as a possibility at the least. Perhaps not even for herself explicitly, but in a theoretical example of herself she gets at a greater issue that just so happens to claim hold of her own life, or, perhaps, her own death.

Of even more curiosity are these two stanzas that feel as though they *mock* those who would prod a corpse:

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

And,

> Ash, ash-
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there-

With death "an art", and one done "exceptionally well", in the context we've defined, there's a clear notion of duping. A perplexing and possessive death is one done "exceptionally well", so captivating that *decades* following it the controversy is no clearer or less divisive. And amidst the "ash" that's being searched for any manner of profit, for a minute detail that could reveal something, or for a new truth, "there is nothing…" The corpse holds nothing besides the meaning that is given it, and from the nothing a spirit of beguiling vengeance is born:

> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.

A scene that calls upon one of Sylvia's most fantastic moments of vengeance in life. After discovering Ted Hughes's infidelity, she returns to her home in carrying a large collection of "Ted's letters, drafts of work, and papers, and the manuscript of what was to have been her second novel, the book about her great love for Ted." Against the protestations of her visiting mother she "built and fed an eager fire with the torn pages of manuscript and correspondence." (Wagner-Martin, 208) After this fiery cleansing, Sylvia went on to write her *Ariel* poems, including "Lady Lazarus".

Poems like this one provide a case for examining literature with the author in mind. Not simply the philosophical stance of the author, an inclusion of the author's life in a strictly biographical sense also holds potential for significant weight as a tool of analysis. But we cannot discredit the reading of people like Jacqueline Rose, something that somewhat ignores the lived experience of an author, yet takes from the work a take *on* life. In the case of Sylvia Plath, what utilizing these two modes of analysis--a traditional within-the-work mode and a reflection-of-lived-experience mode, may accomplish is an identity *of* Plath spoken *by* Plath. It is fair to think that any pursuit of truth in this area is unrealistic, but Plath as a writer deserves more than an association with a ghostly apparition, confused and confounded by gossip, selfishness, and gluttony. She may be fragmented, irreducible to any particular or even satisfactory conclusion, but it is time to let Plath speak for herself.

What makes up the content of this paper is an attempt at this very thing, a search for what may on the surface be called an 'authentic Plath'. However, authenticity has shown itself in all manner of areas, be it political, literary, or laced within one of life's periodic existential crises. While it serves its purpose as a buzzword and an easy way to claim a stake of profundity, the

term is so horridly vague and frustratingly convoluted that it could, really, be said it has no meaning whatsoever. 'Authenticity', the authentic, the "true self", a *real* voice, these are some of the many disturbingly useless words and phrases that pop into the discussion of Plath. As we have seen, she has been somewhat of a biographical nightmare and, in some ways, a fantasy. Seemingly, no longer is Plath known by her work but by the dramatics of her life and marriage, as well as the controversies surrounding the very investigation of who she was. This, however, is not as simple as it seems. This discourse surrounding the figure of Plath is of a making all her own.

We may tell ourselves that biography is objective, we may interpret non-fiction and historic works as general truths, but in the end any work is inherently a subjective and constructed narrative. Within a Plath biography there is the position of the biographer themselves, their own beliefs and position on the subject, and there is the outside influence of the Hughes Estate and whatever their goals may be. The biographer is subject to both their own preferences and the necessity of being subservient to permissions and authorization. This is simply an inevitable truth. This presence of author is both a problem in biographical forays into Plath, as well as the crux of Plath's work. It is with intention that Plath has complicated her figure. Through her authoring of her self via her *Ariel* poems and her novel *The Bell Jar* she has created an inseparability between her art and her figure, completely forming her very self, discourse and personhood, around this paradoxical inseparability. It is this that I will explore in the following chapters, and it is through this voice that Plath will speak.

Chapter 2

The Problem at Hand, a Conceptual Framework

I'd like to preface the bulk of this paper with a conceptual framework. The following is the primary lens through which all of my analysis of Plath's work, specifically *The Bell Jar,* "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", will take place. Throughout the next chapters I will continually return to the complexities and at times paradoxes of this theoretical concept, in hopes of not only further elaborating on it, but shedding even greater light on the intricacies of Plath's work.

With that in mind, let's think conceptually. An underlying principle, one that will help us understand Plath's work within and around *The Bell Jar*, is what I'll begin with calling 'life as art' and work forward from there. In its broadest form, 'life as art' suggests the ability to approach life as one may approach constructing a piece of art. An individual's experience, meaning the events of their life, their intellect, personality, mind, even physical form and life direction, all are a shaped, or *can* be a shaped, purposefully manicured, constructed, or otherwise plotted piece of artwork. This, then, extends to an artist's work itself. The meaning of a particular piece, whatever truths it may put forward or develop or portray, are constructed by the creator of it. This idea will transition into self-authorship, a concept that shares and requires, as we will come to see, many aspects with and within many different concepts, but a good introduction finds itself in Nietzsche:

> *One thing is needful.*-- To "give style" to one's character— a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed— both times through long practice and daily

> work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views… In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste! (Nehamas, 185)

This idea of 'giving style' to one's character can very well be seen as a construction of the self, but it warrants some explanation. One can take their nature and turn it into art by, rather simply it would seem, taking the components of that nature and rendering them as art. While it is fair to acknowledge that this "single taste" which forms this work, the necessity of knowing a nature that includes strengths and weaknesses, is already having a self, the twisting of this, the intense complication that will come to be discussed, is the idea that "original nature has been removed" and that a "second nature has been added" within this artistic rendering of self that appears as a "delight to the eye." Stylizing one's nature, then, acts as a way of replacing one's nature with a stylized variant *of* one's nature, creating a new one. As such, through artwork that rewrites a self one is acting as an author of one's self. Thus, we enter into what I would called self-authorship, which serves as a more precise form of everything discussed up until now. Its working definition as a term is essentially the same as what was ascribed to our phrase 'life as art', except with the added caveat of being based around writing. An individual in this schema, if we were to plot out their personality and life, would be a character and the events of their life a story. Intrinsic to this is an idea of ongoing self-construction. In some manner, the self as a work of art which is constantly being manipulated and formed in order to project a personhood. Anthony Rudd, in the introduction to his book *Self, Value and Narrative*, uses important language in detailing this concept, language that ultimately brings us to the written form. In the declaration that, "The self is not something that just exists, and is then narrated (by itself or by others); it only comes to

exist through its being narrated." (Rudd, "Introduction", 2) he makes two important statements, a self is not a type of born-into persona and really it is in constant formation through being narrated. A self is not something "done once and is then over", even in a moment where someone may enact the self, per se, that specific moment is not a *final* moment. There is a "continuous process" unfolding, and that is the very essence of being a self, of having a self at all. "To be a self," Rudd says, "is to keep on forming oneself as a self." (Rudd, "Self-Shaping and Self-Acceptance", 3) Then, here, we can add to self-authorship that it is an ongoing process, and the "artistic plan" (Nehamas, 185) that Nietzsche mentions is one that is ongoing.

Rudd chooses another incredibly important word in his conceptual discussion, and that is "character." (Rudd, 15) Character, here, is vis a vis personhood an expression of self. This relationship is, admittedly, in need of unpacking, and I would like to go to Rudd himself for both his word choice and a greater explanation of point:

> The way I experience all the different states that are mine is one which relates them all together by relating them to me— not simply as a bare subject, or even as a bare self-conscious person, but as a self; the one with the very specific , individual character that is mine. So, for instance, I don't just impersonally not an entity of a certain shape at a certain spatial distance from me, but, for example, see that familiar chair that is getting a bit shabby but which I am looking forward to sinking into with a nice cup of tea in a minute. I don't just have thoughts and feelings that I experience as mine in some barely logical, impersonal way; my thoughts and feelings are about the plans and projects I have, about the people and things I care for; are directed and coloured by my values, amibitons, and desires. It is because I have the character I do that the world shows up to me in the ways it does, that my experiences are as they are. And it is important to note that not only is our personhood the personhood of beings with characters, so too our characters are the characters of persons… our characters are so much more complex than those of cats and dogs *because* we are self-conscious and therefore persons. How I think and feel about myself, how I assess whether or not I have good reasons to act or think in a certain way, how I worry about how someone else thinks I think about him… such things are all important aspects of my character and could not be had by a character that was not a person. (15)

The fact of the matter is we are conscious beings in a manner beyond most creatures. We are "self-conscious" and it is this self-consciousness that, ipso facto, means we are "persons." It is because we are self-conscious that our characters ultimately become indicative of our selfhood, and it is *also* through this self-consciousness that we are inclined to mediate our character in a way that will affect how our self is perceived. How one, to mimic Rudd's language, thinks and feels about themself, assesses whether or not they have a good rationale to act or think in a certain way, how they perceive and are anxious over the thoughts of others, and all similar acts are part of what constitutes character, and are inherent and necessary in a person, and as such a self. However, these actions that shape character are also *social* in nature. Yes, they are framed by Rudd in a highly individual and internal way, but they have distinct external realities. All of them, in existing within a specific individual, would result in an *impression* of or even *knowledge* of said individual in another individual. As such, part of the equation of what constitutes selfhood is what form that 'knowledge' others possess takes. The aesthetic practice of taking "artifice, arbitrariness, irony, and wilful imagination" ("Soren Kierkegaard", 11) and using them as tools for forming a world, is congruent with using them to form a self. The aesthete uses "the transformation of the boring into the interesting" (11) as a way of creating an authored self, of manipulating the interaction between character and personhood as a way to construct a self. In short, an "infinite possibility" of selfhood "made available through the imagination."[2] (12) And so, self-authorship, it would follow, has a function in the social impression the created art makes via the individual using an aesthetic strategy to manipulate said impression.

[2] This is, in Kierkegaard's own philosophy, not a sustainable practice. While I do ignore this here, it becomes evident in the following chapters.

As mentioned, there is convenience in the use of the word "character" by Rudd, and several other terms and phrases here that, more serendipitously than intentionally, guide us heavily to written art. Self-authorship pertains not only to the character of an individual, but also to their artistic work, and in the case of Plath her written work. Art itself, according to Oscar Wilde within "The Decay of Lying", is a source of "not simple truth but complex beauty." (Wilde, 7) and the complexities of this statement are what constitute its justification of use in and relation to self-authorship. Wilde sees a congruence between lying and art, one that is both underappreciated and becoming forgotten, as writers trade "a natural gift for exaggeration" for "careless habits of accuracy." (3) This loyalty to factuality has ultimately created a world where art is dull, boring, and the artist is constrained:

> He [the modern novelist] has not even the courage of other people's ideas, but insists on going directly to life for everything, and ultimately, between encyclopedias and personal experience, he comes to the ground having drawn his types from the family circle or from the weekly washerwoman, and having acquired an amount of useful information from which never, even in his most meditative moments, can he thoroughly free himself. (2)

To "thoroughly free" oneself means to let oneself separate from the 'realities' of life, but this term 'realities' is complicated to Wilde. Lying is "the telling of beautiful untrue things" and it is the proper aim of art, but the reality *of* art is this very act of lying, of fabrication, of construction. "There is such a thing," he says, "as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true…" (3) To create art which is true to life is destroying it to some extent, it is making it not art. Art's very purpose is to exaggerate, and to remove that is to remove the "very spirit of art." (7) In relation to self-creation and character, we now have a medium in which the very purpose is to falsify and create from nothing. Using art as a method by which to further construct a self seems only natural, to some degree. Art, specifically written art, has this capability. It could be said that

a creation of self isn't art's *duty* specifically, but in self-authorship it is an unavoidable aspect *of* art. Constructing, exaggerating, *lying*, these are methods of creating a truth. With Rudd in mind, that our character and personhood are, by way of existing, perceived *socially*, and that any created art is thus a reflection upon the creator, then the ability, obligation, or fact that, art is itself a medium in which construction is evident, means that in the process of making written art an author is creating their self by way of the perception the art creates. Self-authorship then has a degree of liberty in what sort of impression it creates. *Lying* can then be made nearly congruent with *constructing* in our terminology, and the exaggeration behind Wilde's concepts are then intrinsic parts of self-authorship.

Plath and her novel *The Bell Jar* become a perfect case study in the complexities of the concept, especially now that we have arrived at the idea of lying. Plath was a confessional poet, but her relationship with that classification is complicated. Partly due to to her own opinion of the matter, as she found it ridiculous to treat poetry like "some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion" (x, Kirsch), and partly due to her works achieving an in between space of what we would consider factual experience versus what is expressed as experience. It is in this 'between space' that Plath creates an intense mental friction in her readers.

Adam Kirsch, in the introduction to *The Wounded Surgeon*, distinguishes confessional poets as those who "... redefined our notion of what it means for a poet to write honestly." (ix) According to Kirsch, the genre was not so much about confessing the sins of one's life in poetic detail on a page, but rather "...using language in a deliberately artful and artificial way," to address "...not facts about the poet's life, but the inner truth of his or her experience." (xv) (It's important here to put a pin on this term "honestly", and remember it going forward. What exactly

is honesty? And how does it relate to an "inner truth of... experience"?) There is, when it comes to Plath, an urge that is at times overpowering to view Plath in a manner contrary to this. As discussed in the previous chapter, her poems use language and subjects that automatically draw connections in our minds to her own personal life. We read "Daddy" and think what a horrible father Plath must have had or "Elm" and wonder if she was frightened of her children and what their needs might drive her to. She *must* have, she *had to* have, but more often than not we have no way of confirming or proving any of our impressions.

It could be said that what Plath has written exists solely on the page. It is an an art that has been constructed and consumed by us. The argument there being the creative work is separate from Plath herself, Plath as a life and an individual. Whatever connections may be present in a *reader's* mind between her art and her life, are basically coincidental, as what is there is not representative of a literal occurence in Plath's life but rather *her experience* of those events. What she is giving is not necessarily a fact, but a truth of her experience expressed in poetry.

But that just doesn't quite cut it does it?

Self-authorship constituted an "individual's experience" as what could be constructed, what was within the bounds of a constructed self. In fact, it basically encapsulated the whole package of manipulatable areas. If Kirsch defines confessional poetry as an expression of "inner truth of… experience" then what exactly does experience *mean* in that context and how is it different from the "facts about the poet's life"? How does self-authorship complicate this? What can be regarded as a truth when a life is constructed, purposely created the way it is? When it is written out to be what it is presented as? These are difficult questions. When it comes down to it,

just about every aspect of a human life that involves creating some image, particularly one tied to oneself (think along the lines of clothing, digital photos, social media, then things like autobiographies, documentaries, journals, artistic work) involves a sense of personal construction. In making decisions where consequences lead back to you as a person and create an impression in a viewing or receiving individual's mind, there is an inherent caretaking of image, or construction of a self. In choosing clothing, you are choosing a stylistic persona. In selecting a photograph to hang up, frame, or post on social media, you are choosing a physical appearance, implying a personality. In writing, you are writing with the implicit existence of a reader, one who will extrapolate what they may about *you*, the author, from the text, and make judgements about you as a result of the story you create. So, really, what *is* honesty in the face of what is *representative* experience, when what is shown is curated and constructed and made to symbolize experience? Being 'honest' we traditionally see as being truthful to those around you, being honest with oneself is more of a special case.

We may need to adjust our understanding of the norm and see honesty as an internal expression turned outward in the case of Plath's work. Honesty is not tied to facts of a life, but expression of emotion, pronunciation of feeling. If we accept honesty as it has shifted here in interacting with self-authorship, then now we must clarify experience's role. Ultimately, internal expression is a result of experience. In Kirsch's terms, however, it is not simply that an individual encounters an event and derives an experience, which then becomes internal expression, or honesty, but an experience having an inner truth, an internal meaning, that when combined with the individual, presumably a poet, creates the honesty we have detailed. Undoubtedly a problem arises when we think about the capability of experience, and by this I

mean two things. The first, being what an individual is actually *able* to experience. The second, being how different the internal expression can be from the actual experience.

I will get more in depth into this poem in Chapter 4, but Plath's "Daddy" is a perfect way to exemplify this issue. A brief look at a single stanza should suffice:

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew. (*Ariel,* 57)

For the sake of argument, let's operate on the idea that the speaker here is Plath. She was not Jewish, nor did she experience the Holocaust in any way, even ancestrialy. Yet, in her art she creates the image of a train transporting Jewish people to concentration camps, and then in beginning to "talk like a Jew" and the, very literal, idea that she "may well be a Jew", she assigns whatever connotative meaning we have with that imagery and whatever historical meaning in and behind it to herself, to her own experience. If we are to believe that her work, the poem "Daddy" included, is *honest*, that it is the result of an experience, then just how far are we willing to go with that? Could she possibly know the same feeling that she's invoking here? Could it be comparable to whatever has actually resulted in these lines? It seems logical to assume that there has to be some kind of cohesion between honesty and experience, that one can't have an 'honest' expression without an experience that matches it, that there is some amount of relativity. Then again, maybe relativity is not the right word, rather we should be thinking along the lines of fidelity. Kirsch's notion of "inner truth", congruent with honest expression, is, as we see, a dangerous term. In trying to determine whether an experience has an inner truth, we run into the problem of relation between honesty and experience. A problem here

is the personal nature of the concept. “Inner truth” is representative of what the *experiencer* extrapolates from the experience. Experience a non-universal concept, an “inner truth” can be different between you or I, between Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, etc. etc. If we are to try and determine what is honest about an experience-based expression, we would have to account for an individual’s interior process and legitimization of their experience.

I believe following Foucault’s reasoning in “What is an Author?” would be a good step in the exploration of how we justify an experience. In Foucault’s exploration of “author-function”, one of the more pertinent aspects is his discussion on naming. He asserts that “The name of an author poses all the problems related to the category of the proper name…” the “proper name” meaning a name with “other than indicative functions.” (Foucault, 121) Rather than being simply a form of identification, a la “a finger pointed at someone”, it is “the equivalent of a description.” (121) While they may share the same set of problems, they are “not isomorphous” (122), the name of an author and a proper name “oscillate between the poles of description and designation… granting that they are linked to what they name, they are not totally determined either by their descriptive or designative functions.” (121) While this is a bit confounding, he clarifies exactly what he means here:

> The disclosure that Shakespeare was not born in the house that tourists now visit would not modify the functioning of the author’s name, but, if it were proved that he had not written the sonnets that we attribute to him, this would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author’s name functions. Moreover, if we establish that Shakespeare wrote Bacon’s *Organon* and that the same author was responsible for both the works of Shakespeare and those of Bacon, we would have introduced a third type of alteration which completely modifies the functioning of the author’s name. Consequently, the name of an author is not precisely a proper name among others. (122)

An author’s name ultimately functions as a “means of classification” (123), meaning that the utterance of it groups together texts and suggests a distinct difference of some kind between

them and others, even if that difference is simply it was written by Shakespeare. An author's name suggests a group and type of discourse, and essentially contains an idea set. That being said, the function of an author isn't only determined by the discourse that has been attributed to them, rather "It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author." (127) Foucault mentions notions of an individual's "profundity", "creative power", "intentions" or "original inspiration" as what constitute a reader's, or a body of readers', construction of an author and their function. He calls them "projections", and I would agree, but prefer to call them constructions. They are "psychological" methods of "handling texts", which lay in our comparisons, extrapolations, and at times our excluded information. (127)

Foucault does enter an interesting area with a type of rebuke, or maybe simply a complication, of this method of construction:

> When discourse is linked to an author, however, the role of "shifters" is more complex and variable. It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather they stand for a "second self" whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission— in the division and distance of the two. (129)

This is, of course, a rather classic statement, that "neither the first person… the present indicative tense, nor,... its signs of localization refer directly to the writer..." I am not unaware of this, and I am also not unaware that if we are to believe Plath's statement as cited in Kirsch, that poetry is no place for therapy, then we could have no reason to believe that Plath is speaking in "Daddy". This notion of "second self" is extremely intriguing though, and in regards to self-authorship, I see no reason why it can't remain at least partially true. We have already established thus far that

written art is a method of self-construction, so it seems reasonable to think that depending on the circumstance it could become a “second self” as well, or represent one.

In regards to this idea that first person or other indications of a personal presence are not indicative of the author’s literal presence, I have two statements in response. The first, I’m not quite sure if it makes a complete difference, as I would argue that, in "Daddy", that the speaker is established to not be Jewish via the first person results in the exact same questions that may arise if the speaker was Plath. There is still the complication of experience and honest expression. Secondly, the argument within self-authorship is that art is unavoidably connected to the creator of the art. No matter what, the author’s/creator’s name is connected to their work, and as such the idea that “the speaker isn’t the author” is somewhat flawed, as unless this imaginary speaker wrote the piece then the author’s voice is in it regardless, be it through their own ethical principles or their own grand questions. Self-authorship, then, is not only a method by which an individual may construct their self, but an interaction between an individual and any creation of artwork. Not only is an artist, in our context a novelist/poet, creating a work of art, but *within* a work of art they are creating themselves. When an artist represents their inner truth, puts forward their honest expression, in an art form, they are quite literally molding it and shaping it into a manner that presumably best describes that experience. As such, they are authoring their self, *even if* the work does not necessarily have them as a subject. There will always be the presence of an author in a text, their influence is ever present, their creation is what a reader consumes.

This issue of author presence runs very closely to a question of what an author’s intention is, something that W.K. Wimsatt Jr and M.C. Beardsley see as a type of fallacy. They define intention as a “design or plan in the author’s mind,” which is influenced by an “author’s attitude

toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write," (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 469) and they see intention as something not worth looking at, if relevant at all. Laying out five "axiomatic" statements speaking to the inadequacy, if not foolhardiness, of analysis with intention in mind, which I will summarize. The first, is somewhat of an admittance, "A poem does not come into existence by accident," (469) but just because an author is the "*cause* of a poem," does not mean their intention or design is "*standard."* The second, that "If the poet succeeded in doing it," it being whatever they intended, "then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do." (469) And so if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is inadequate to determine an author's intention, and so the only way to determine it is to go outside of the poem in search of evidence for its intention. This pulls the reader away from the poem itself, and thus away from its meaning. The third, is somewhat confusing but rather simple, "A poem can *be* only through its *mean*ing— since its medium is words— yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant."(469) Basically this means that a poem exists within itself and only within itself. Whatever style, grammatical tools, words, that were used to constitute it are the *only* methods by which its meaning is created. The fourth is essentially what led us here, that we, as readers, "ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*, and if to the author at all, only by a biographical act of interference." (470) A poem is "dramatic", it is a "response of the speaker… to a situation…" The fifth addresses revision. Any improvements that an author may make that better achieve his intention is in a "very abstract, tautological, sense that he intended to write a better work and now has done it." (470) What they did not include as an axiom, but I believe they should have, is the idea that a "poem belongs to the public." (470) It is not by a critic's interpretation or an author's intention,

but by a larger public possession that a poem is given authority or meaning. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, “What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology or morals.” (47)

As one may expect, I don’t think this is true in its entirety. It just doesn't make sense to say that the intention of the creator of a work is irrelevant, that what really matters is the public's interpretation. Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that while it makes sense to derive intent from “practical messages,” which I interpret to mean rhetoric of some form, because the intention is what matters there, but *all* work has some manner of rhetoric. That an author has an idea and a design in their mind that is constructing a story or a poem, that is essentially manifesting their feelings towards or comments on something, means that whatever state of mind *drove* the creation of that story or poem is *essential* to what it means. To say intention doesn’t matter, makes it seem as though a work just sort of pops into creation, that there ultimately isn’t anything behind it. Somehow this piece of work just sort of created its own meaning, as if a human with their own goals and objectives, their own circumstance and intellect, did not construct it with whatever those goals and objectives were. Much in the same way that to author one’s individual life means that you are constructing it, shaping it in a representative way in whatever manner you see fit in order to create a kind of drama or narrative, you write a novel or poem to, quite literally, create a drama or narrative. But, like mentioned before, the novel or poem is simultaneously *product of* and *contribution to* a constructed identity that an author possesses.

I want to make clear that I am not discrediting the idea of public interpretation, but I think both, the author’s meaning/intention and the public’s interpretation, can exist at once. Every

work has layers, to account for each personal interpretation of a work would be to account for billions of people's individual experience and minds, etc. etc. I will admit, when it comes to intention and experience, we do ultimately run into a problem with "Daddy." It is exceedingly difficult to reconcile that difference between what is 'real' and what is constructed when it necessitates an interaction with *another* self as "Daddy" does. This is a problem that Plath was aware of, however, and in Chapter 4, this issue of intention gets worked around.

And thus, what are we to make of Plath's writing? That is the central question going into the next two chapters. Plath is easily read as biographical, or at least non-fiction, because so much of her poetry, for reasons we will discuss, uses a style that is either a personal I or, if one has biographical knowledge of Plath, references events of her own life. *The Bell Jar's* events are for the most part analogous to those of Plath's life, and, like her poems, contains commentary on these reflections of real events, or seemingly self-referential moments. Why is this then? Written art is, in both the product and process, an act of self-construction. The very nature of an artistic work is of exaggeration, of lying, of construction, and yet what we are given in Plath's work is something that is so incredibly *honest* but at the same time works of fiction, works of construction, of incongruence. There is intent behind this, intent behind creating a self in this manner, knowing what would happen in the reader's mind as they search to categorize and rationalize choices and styles within her work.

Plath, I believe, purposely wrote *The Bell Jar* to challenge and satirize the critical modes of the time, that the author is a separate entity from the work, by intentionally tempting the reader to interpret the text in a way that is inseparable from its author. Including the circumstance of its publication, genre, and contents, so much is packed in and around the novel

that it would be a jumbled mess of unjust analysis to try and address its devilish use of self-authorship's concepts all in one go. As such, it seems only right to think about *The Bell Jar* in two parts: in the context of Esther Greenwood and in the context of Sylvia Plath. In the latter, I will engage with Plath in a more biographical sense, exploring the surrounding circumstance of the creation of the novel, its self-referential nature to some of her poetry, and what Plath the author has done to create her self. In the former and present, we will leave questions of Plath herself aside and focus entirely on the novel sans real life connections, entirely on its main character Esther Greenwood, who embodies someone who simultaneously writes their own narrative and possesses no real identity, who is struggling with selfhood and construction of it in a personal, authored way. In both, we will work with self-authorship in mind, the two primary questions being: (1) How does Esther develop/live the concept? (2) Why and how does Plath use this strategy of self-authorship, and how does the difficulty it creates add to her work?

Chapter 3

In the Context of Esther Greenwood

Contained within *The Bell Jar* itself is the plight, at times of a humorous context, at others dark, and sometimes both, of Esther Greenwood. As the main character and narrator of the novel, Esther retells her variety of experiences during college, during which she attempts over and over to assign herself a life-narrative and struggles with psychiatric institutions after several attempts at suicide. She is, as the story progresses and continuously lays out, incapable of committing to any identity within life, and at times incapable of committing to any action. Her consistent detailing of life-narratives, projections of characters and lives that she could live if only she did x, y or z, as well as the context around her interactions with psychiatry, are indicative of her living within a struggle of self-authorship. Throughout the text, she seeks to create a self beyond her self, either in imagining, a literal creative process, or through accessing her past, but the consequences of the process paralyze and constrain her, and ultimately she is unable to carve a path that is truly and distinctly her own.

A phenomenal place to start is in terms of Esther's physical viewing of her body. Distinct from how one may *think* of oneself internally, this is a physical and social projection, and as such a curated image that is socially shared which is far easier to define, far more literal, than one based more around thought. Esther is a collector and creator of identities, and while this extends to things such as "men with interesting names" (51) it flares consistently and most destructively as 'life-narratives'. What I mean by this is an imagined possibility, a fantasy or projection, which

Esther primarily bases around herself. She constructs, on a whim essentially, pathways through life, perhaps even characters, which she can embody or, simply speaking, live. In a humorous way, among the reader's most immediate textual interactions with Esther she actually takes on the identity of one of these imagined characters, in this case "Elly Higginbottom." (Plath, *TBJ,* 11) As she says, "I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name…" (11), she separates her self from this life-narrative, making sure they are not one in the same. Esther and Elly are completely unrelated people. As such, no actions, decisions, or normal shapings of a self of one of them reflects on the other. However, there is something to be said here for the irony of this statement, we, as the reader, *know* that she is hiding her self, or at least creating a separation. In reality, because we are made privy to her attempted separation, we are in fact seeing at *most* a duality, but most likely just characterizing Esther through her actions. The act of "[changing her] name to Elly Higginbottom for good" (132) and starting a life in Chicago would hide her failings as Esther, that she "had thrown up a scholarship", "mucked up a month in New York" and "refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband" (132) would be facts of a life unknown. If she managed to do that, "people would take [her] for what [she] was." (133) Of course, she isn't "simply Elly Higginbottom," (133) because, as we know, she is Esther Greenwood. To be 'taken as she is' is a paradoxical principle, as she is distinctly *not* Elly Higginbottom in the reader's eyes and mind. However, to create this identity and then to live it, and *not* live as Esther Greenwood, would mean that she is more distinctly *Elly* rather than *Esther*, despite Elly being a complete fabrication. This, of course, is ultimately cast off, as this would only come about if she "happened to feel like it." (133) Control returns to Esther in the

assumption of an identity, she asserts "If *I* happened to feel like it" (133, italics mine) this "I" being Esther, who is the ultimate decision maker.

This "I", however, is fairly up in the air. Whether Esther has a true idea of what that "I" means is a difficult question, and one that lead to the question of if an "I" even exists at all for Esther? She tends to define herself by a relation to others, especially in the beginning of the novel, giving her companion Doreen the privilege of being "a secret voice speaking straight out of [her] own bones," (7) but, interestingly enough, deciding to have "nothing at all to do with [Doreen]," that "Deep down" it had been "Betsy [she] resembled at heart." (22) While this is a mimicry of the noncommittal tendency earlier described, it is hardly the end of the rabbit hole, as the vague "I" takes on more physical aspects as well. A compelling example is the appearance of her physical image, or non-appearance. This takes an obvious form in the casting off of her wardrobe "Piece by piece… to the night wind… ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know…" (111) and then a particularly disturbing and complex form in her reflection and, in a similar and for our purposes one and the same, appearance in photos. Esther never really 'sees' herself in any reflective surface or photograph. Her descriptions of her apparent image are along the lines of "a smudgy-eyed Chinese woman," (18) "a sick Indian," (112) "the face" reflected "in a bell of dentist's mercury," (19) "the person in the picture," (174) or, most simply, "a girl." (198) In a truly confounding conversation, this phenomenon takes interesting twists:

> "Oh, Esther,'" Joan said then, holding the magazine, "isn't this you?"
>
> DeeDee stopped playing. "Let me see." She took the magazine, peered at the page Joan pointed to, and then glanced back at me.
>
> "Oh no," deeDee said. "Surely not." She looked at the magazine again, then at me. "Never!"
>
> "Oh, but it *is* Esther, isn't it, Esther?" Joan said.

> Loubelle and Mrs. Savage drifted over, and pretending I knew what it was all about, I moved to the piano with them.
>
> The magazine photograph showed a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split, with a whole lot of boys bending in around her. The girl was holding a glass full of a transparent drink and seemed to have her eyes fixed over my shoulder on something that stood behind me, a little to my left. A faint breath fanned the back of my neck. I wheeled round.
>
> The night nurse had come in, unnoticed, onj her soft rubber soles.
>
> "No kidding," she said, "is that really you?"
>
> "No, it's not me. Joan's quite mistaken. It's somebody else."
>
> "Oh, say it's you!" DeeDee cried.
>
> But I pretended I didn't hear her and turned away. (207-208)

That the reader never finds out if the girl in the photograph really is Esther is no real surprise. Her physical appearance is a mystery to us and, at times, seemingly even a mystery to her. Likely one of the most significant identifiers of a person, one of the best canvases upon which an individual can construct their self, is their physical body. Yet, it is a consistently vague subject, that being said, there are some key questions/pleas in this exchange that bring forward this very idea. DeeDee's plea for Esther to just "say it's [her]!" suggests that it is within Esther's power to take responsibility, per se, for this image, to attach her self to it, by simply *saying* that it is her, by speaking it. Joan's question, "... but it *is* Esther, isn't it, Esther?" borderlines on the absurd, but the two lines harken back to the Elly/Esther problematic. Asking Esther if an image is Esther, and phrasing it in that way, rather than "This is you, isn't it, Esther?" suggests a separation between physical being and the image. Esther would need to consume this image, in a metaphorical sense, into her construct of 'Esther', into what that self means, in order for it to have an Esther-ian, per se, narrative. Similar to Rudd's notion that a self comes into existence "through its being narrated" (Rudd, 2), even *if* the girl in the photo is Esther, if she does not claim it as Esther then it is not part of Esther's narrative. If one considers the photo a piece of art

work within the canon of an individual's self-authorship, it is as if Esther is refusing to take the work under her umbrella. It is then not considered an influence on the self. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this conversation takes place in an asylum, but that is a point that will be addressed later on. For now, let's remain within this life-narrative and self-imagining frame and look further at Esther's inability to commit, which takes some dark and morbid turns.

Similar to Elly Higginbottom, Esther, seemingly on a whim, imagines and seamlessly communicates personas and life-narratives throughout the novel. She is able to, in at times just a few sentences, set the canvas of fantasy lives. There's "Ee Gee, the famous editor" (*TBJ,* Plath, 39), a spin-off of Jay Cee, the editor of *Mademoiselle* within the story, a "war correspondent like Maggie Higgins" that would emerge from her in the life that she learned German and travelled to Europe. (78) There's the writer, whom she envisions multiple times, coming from her having "decided" that she would "surprise Jay cee and send in a couple of the stories [she] wrote… under a pseudonym." (103) Another, later, in the midst of a major depressive episode of some kind, she quickly rattles off pathways that would remove her from it. Again she "decided" on one of these paths, she would "spend the summer writing a novel." (119) The heroine of her story, she says, "would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine." (120) While she doesn't progress beyond an opening few lines, she is literally creating a fictional version of herself, a "myself, only in disguise." Esther is perceived by other characters as someone who wants "to be everything," yet is defined within the novel by what she isn't. She *isn't* any of these life-narratives that she creates, and her list of what she isn't, what she can't do, simply grows longer and longer. (75) The one admitted skill she has is "winning scholarships and prizes",

which equates to being a good student, but that does little for her. But even this she has difficulty committing to:

> I thought I would spend the summer reading *Finnegans Wake* and writing my thesis.
>
> Then I would be way ahead when college started at the end of september, and able to enjoy my last year instead of swotting away with no makeup and stringy hair, on a diet of coffee and Benzedrine, the way most of the seniors taking honors did, until they finished their thesis.
>
> Then I thought I might put off college for a year and apprentice myself to a pottery maker.
>
> Or work my way to Germany and be a waitress, until I was bilingual. (122)

While, yes, this begins with her returning to student-dom, writing a thesis and reading, she combines two scholarly pursuits with are likely two of the worst things to be paired together. Why read *Finnegans Wake* while writing a thesis? Why complicate the task to near impossibility, making your alternatives either likely failure or, as it would seem, going crazy on "coffee and Benzedrine"? Some part of this makes it seem as though it is set up to fail, and that reflects Esther's inability to commit. Not only on a more simplistic task oriented level, but on the level of self and narrative. As with the photograph, she is noncommittal, paralyzed, when it comes to asserting a self, taking the work into her canon. Whether out of fear, anxiety, or what have you, it is almost certain that she is frozen in place in some sense. This freeze is something that Esther is aware of, at the least to some extent, as she has her own metaphor for it, that of the fig tree:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just 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. (77)

The position "in the crotch of this fig tree" is one of paralysis. Paralysis not simply because of so many options, but because of the consequence of choosing one. She truly *does* want "to be everything" (101), wanting "each and every one" of the figs in the tree. The desire is strong, but the awareness that "choosing one [means] losing all the rest" results in a frozen self-construction, non-committal and immobile, almost a type of death. If perhaps we became excited for a type of epiphany in this fig tree metaphor, Esther writes it off in the same way she does all her imagined lives, albeit with amusing simplicity, saying that her "vision of the fig tree and all the fat figs that withered and fell to earth might well have arisen from the profound void of an empty stomach," (78) which is in itself an example of her noncommittal nature. The ironic classification later on of her "heartbeat" booming "like a dull motor", the rhythm sounding off "I am I am I am" (158) is that she is not anything. "I am" what, exactly? Esther certainly has no idea, and this is ultimately a major indicator of a complication in self-authorship. While we do not exactly know what that complication is, Esther is clearly struggling to actually *live* as one of the selves she authors. There is ultimate potential, of course, as the only limits are, within the concept, one's imagination, their own artistic ability. This limitlessness is paralyzing. There are too many options, and the imagining of them all, the thought of everything, results in an effective authoring of none at all. Esther is already on the precipice of mocking the idea of self-authorship with the "I am I am I am", and it is perhaps this knowledge that a principle she is trying to live by is actually leading her into a type of paralysis that motivates her to end that heartbeat.

To be blunt, Esther's inability to commit extends to her attempts on her own life. The morbidity of that statement does not escape me, but it is a reality of the novel. Her first attempt is made up of what she characterizes as "dallying", up until the moment she realizes she had taken up nearly "the better part of the morning" setting things up, and that her "mother would probably come home" and find her before she had died. (148) Her second is similar, as she spends what amounts to essentially an entire day waiting on a beach, where she had planned to walk out into the ocean with bleeding wrists. During this, where she is eventually warded off by the cold water, she remarks about the poetics her left-behind shoes would inspire, "It pleased me to think they would be perched there on the silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul-compass after I was dead." (151) What to make of that kind of aesthetic look towards one's death? The idea that these shoes act as a "soul compass" necessitates the death that they point to as one that has provided direction to a soul, and, if we are to extrapolate a bit, therefore a direction to a self. This is at odds, one may think, with the very idea of self-authorship, presumably one needs to *live* the authored life in order for the strategy to actually be a strategy, but the artistic construction that is so pivotal to self-authorship is used here in relation to death. Artistic construction of her own death manifests itself in her third attempt as well, as she sets herself into an "earth-bottomed crevice"(169) in her cellar:

> It took me a good while to heft my body into the grap, but at last, after many tries, I managed it, and crouched at the mouth of the darkness, like a troll.
>
> The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet, but cold. I wondered how long it had been since this particular square of soil had seen the sun.
>
> Then, one after the other, I lugged the heavy, dust-covered logs across the hole mouth. The dark felt thick as velvet. I reached for the glass and bottle, and carefully, on my knees, with bent head, crawled to the furthest wall. (169)

Esther, here, metaphorically returns to the womb. Heaving her whole body into a "darkness" that is "thick as velvet," bare feet pressing into "soil", something to be planted in, crawling her way deeper in. There is undoubtedly a symbolic relevance here. In her death she is not only returning to where she was brought into the world, metaphorically, but intentionally doing so, purposely choosing it. In picking how she dies, she is constructing that very image, in a paradoxical way creating a narrative in life via her death. In Esther's first near death experience, a skiing incident, she had already expressed this sentiment:

> A small, answering point in my own body flew toward it. I felt my lungs inflate with the in rush of scenery— air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, "This is what it is to be happy."
>
> I plummeted down past the zigzaggers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.
>
> People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly. (97)

This moment where there is a very real possibility she could die, the thought of which "formed in [her] mind as coolly as a tree or flower" (97), is not irrelevant, but it isn't relevant in the way one may think. Dying is a freedom, the process by which it would happen gives Esther an epiphanic moment, thinking that this is ".. what it is to be happy." The theme of "doubleness" that we have discussed emerges, as she "plummeted", a verb that is typically very negative, in an almost gleeful, but no less dangerous way. Her swift course to what she calls the "bright point at the end.." of a tunnel shows her as "the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly." Setting the womb and death once again as one. This subject of childhood though did not simply emerge here and die off, and certainly the concept of motherhood does not either. Esther at a point in the novel begins to regress to a child-like state. She "[slips] out of bed and onto the rug" and discreetly "on [her] hands and knees, [crawls] over" to a window in order to spy on a pregnant

woman “with a grotesque, protruding stomach.” (116) Her ability to write has all but disappeared and takes on the style and characteristics of a child drawing with crayons, “... when I took up my pen, my hand made big jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew.” (13) During her time in the asylum, she drags a blanket with her everywhere she goes (210), and before being brought to electro-shock therapy she throws a tantrum, “I curled up in the far corner of the alcove with the blanket over my head.” (211) During her tantrum, Doctor Nolan, her caretaker, takes on an explicit maternal description, “Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother.” (212) Psychiatric care, and medicine more broadly in some senses, is put in tandem with childhood, and very often presented somewhat satirically during Esther’s experience. The former emerges first in a fairly disturbing image of fetuses in jars at a medical school:

> Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born. The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile. (63)

It is from this that she goes on to watch a birth, and finds it a horrifying experience. The mother is unseen besides “an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs” (65), and all the while during the birth she “never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise.” (66) Needless to say, it isn’t the most encouraging sight. Humourously enough, before witnessing it she is told, “You oughtn’t to see this,” by a student, “You’ll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn’t to let women watch. It’ll be the end of the human race.” (65) When learning of the drug the mother had been on, one where she supposedly would “forget she’d had any pain” (66)

Esther remarks it as “just like the sort of drug a man would invent.” (66) Despite the mother having to go through the horrible experience, “she would go straight home and start another baby,” all because the drug made her forget. (66) For Esther, being married and having children “was like being brainwashed,” and, “afterward you went around numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state.” (85) This idea of control extends even further, down into the depths of electroshock therapy. It was not uncommon in antipsychiatric thinking at the time that, according to Michael Staub, “psychiatry was social control in the guise of ‘treatment’... procedures like electroshock therapy punished deviance and enforced ‘conformism.” (Staub, 3) With that context in mind, it is surely no coincidence that the novel opens with “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs,” (*TBJ*, Plath, 1) spies from an enemy nation, representatives, in a dramatic sense, of an extracultural evil, an against-the-norm demon. Very quickly afterwards, Esther acknowledges how all the women around her “looked awfully bored,” “bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with men in Brazil,” (4) bored with the standardized glamor, the standardized life. Psychiatric influence, at the time, had permeated into daily consumed media like magazines and columns, even including things like self-tests for determining “how normal you really are.” (Staub, 13) There was a popular notion at the time that “many Americans ran a high risk of developing mental illnesses because they had been raised in families that had not provided them enough warmth…” (15) Something that leads directly into this return to a child-like state, as well as the infatuation with motherhood, and even the equivalency of the womb to death. In this way, psychiatry sort of acts like a society-based author of self within the novel, tracing a life to the roots, diagnosing a future based on a past, essentially writing a

narrative. Psychiatry's position of authority, however, is mocked by the novel, not least noticeably in Dr. Nolan's reaction to Esther declaring she hates her mother, "But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much and said, 'I suppose you do.'" (*TBJ*, 203) It is somewhat of a cliche to have a child admit to a psychiatrist that they hate their parent, and in the context of tracing self back to the very roots of an individual's creation the admittance by Esther here plays right into the hands of psychiatry's strategy.

The Bell Jar and Esther distrust psychiatry, and it is in Esther's experience with psychiatrists and within the asylum, that self-construction reemerges most clearly. In her first interaction with Doctor Gordon she lays out her expectations for a psychiatrist, that he would be a "kind, ugly, intuitive man looking up and saying 'Ah!' in an encouraging way," that he "would lean back in his chair and match the tips of his fingers together in a little steeple" and go on to solve all her problems. (129) But, Dr. Gordon, and as such the psychiatrist, is portrayed as somewhat of a hack. His very first statement, "Your mother tells me you are upset." (128) sets the stage for his disinterested counsel. Esther is asked to say what she "[thinks] is wrong," (129) and her suspicion grows to a point where she simply reveals what she wants to him, taking pride in her ability to "control the picture he had of [her] by hiding this and revealing that." (130) Dr. Gordon's one moment of eureka, his literal "Ah!" (131) moment, is him remembering his time at Esther's college, and that they had a WAC station, before sending her off with a "See you next week, then." (131) Her interactions with Dr. Gordon are fruitless, the closest he comes to speaking with her truly is by simply asking "how do you feel this week?" (134) before having her go through electroshock therapy. Once she decides to stop seeing Dr. Gordon, after the electroshock, her mother comments, "I knew you'd decide to be all right again," (146)

highlighting how normalcy is seen as a choice, and being congruent with Esther's decision later to "practice [her] new, normal personality" (226) after some time in an asylum. The function of psychiatry is to lay out the choice between normal and crazed, and all the servants of psychiatry were ways of presenting "alternatives," either get better or fall "like a burning then burnt-out star." (209) The character Joan, who joins Esther at the asylum, to some degree represents these alternatives, as she is originally a "beaming double" of Esther's "old best self," who, Esther decides, was "specially designed to follow and torment" her. (205) But this is Joan at first, as time goes on and Joan 'deteriorates' and Esther 'improves'-- "Ever since the shock treatments had ended," (216)-- the function swaps. Joan clings to Esther "like a large and breathless fruitfly— as if the sweetness of recovery were something she could suck up by mere nearness." (216) Joan, growing worse and worse in some unnamed and supposed way, had had her intellectual and physical freedom restricted as consequence, "They had taken away her physics books and the piles of dusty spiral pads full of lecture notes… and she was confined to grounds again." (216) As Esther improved, her freedom was reinstated, an emphasis seemingly on the scale of normalcy. If you are 'mad', you are restricted to the area the 'mad' are kept. A social demarcation that Esther had experienced her self, but ultimately reinforces once the tables are turned. Joan commits suicide later on, and the metaphor of her as an "old best self" sits disturbingly by. During her time in the asylum, she is confronted, as she was with Joan, with reminders of what she was, or could be. It is this idea that what she was formed who she is, or will be, that had been at least partially related to her regression to a child-like state. At a point she describes herself as seeing, "as if through the keyhole of a door [she] couldn't open," herself and her younger brother. (137) She is denied access to what, in psychiatric terms, may be seen as

the root of the self, the formative years. Yet she is able to view, to observe, in the same way she was able to observe the fetuses in the jars, and the same way the doctors observe her and her companions. When she becomes more child-like, she is, in some ways, reliving what she is denied access to, taking control away from psychiatry, reforming her past with her own authorship. If she is able to take control of her narrative by rewriting it, since she had been unable to construct from where she was, then perhaps she would have beaten this system, beaten the bell jar. When trapped in "the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream," (237) the pressures imposed by a broader society forming what is normal, what is sane, and the reinforcement that psychiatry is shown to have, limit the construction and capability of the self in Esther's world. Her efforts to separate herself from the whole system of childhood, and thus from this method of control and into a world where she has control of her self, via birth control are seen as "climbing to freedom." (223) This freedom very nearly kills her, however, as it resulted in some severe and dangerous hemorrhaging, a case that is supposedly "one in a million." (233) Esther cannot escape the constraints, not by bad luck, not a "one in a million" chance, but by the very nature of the system itself. While, at the end of her journey, she is no longer constrained in the bell jar, "its stifling distortions" (241) linger on her periphery, waiting for their chance to return. Her dread is joined by the "brag" of her heart, once again sounding "I am, I am, I am" in a flat and defeated irony. Even here, many pages later, the question remains, I am what? She has come no closer to definition, no closer to a realization of a self. Her normalized self is just as constrained as her past, but she is in a state that is apparently unaware of that beyond the dread of "the bell jar" returning. But we must wonder if "the bell jar" and all the horror that comes along with it, was more freeing than her 'fixed' state at the end of

the novel? It has been proven to her, through near death, through electroshock, and through multiple attempts at suicide, that she cannot reach what she's grasping for. This is, of course, not to justify suicide in anyway, but her own statements reflect the sentiment, saying "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at." (147) Her ultimate desire was seemingly to kill the restriction, kill the paralyzed Esther that couldn't decide on which fig to eat, but what she got in the end was a distinct lack of self. The closing line of the novel reflects that, as she is to be approved by a panel of doctors for release, "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room." (244) Guided by a "magical thread," the thread of normalcy, sanity, standardized expectations, what have you. As we can assume from Esther's reference to "the baby" (3) early on in the novel, as she is looking back, she has basically slotted into a role that she both despised and dreaded. She may not be in her paralyzed state anymore, but she has lost what may be amounted to a degree of sentience, as she has been locked into a narrative, a defined self. In a twisted way, this is likely what she feared, that choosing one fig meant losing all the others, but the horror lay in the choice not being hers, and the chosen fig being one she had so fought against.

It was her own inability to commit that restricted her agency while in her state of paralysis, that kept her from fully taking on any of her narratives into her self. The implications, expressed within the novel, of psychiatric practice that helped her escape the paralysis, but into a new type, one of constraint, one of determination rather than construction. Her narrative is no longer her own; she did not create it. It was assigned to her through expressions of normalcy,

through standardization. The role the reader is left with is not one of poet, publisher, simultaneous interpreter, or even waitress or student, but of mother, of child-rearing and care, something made intertwined with control and brainwashing. Esther's decision was not her own, but to be left in the crotch of that fig tree would be to be left to die, self-less amongst an unwritten and unlived narrative.

Chapter 4

In the Context of Sylvia Plath

Plath the author in context with her work is where everything thus far comes to an important and dramatic head. As alluded to or otherwise briefly mentioned, her work has the tendency to directly connect itself with her own biographical life. That her work, in particular *The Bell Jar* and our two principle poems, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" from *Ariel*, was written during the era of new criticism, and that it so unabashedly includes these biographical connections inspires some paradoxical and at times truly a haunting, premonition-esque, significance. It is as if she had foresaw the discourse around her work and the controversy surrounding her life during her writing, and as a result in many ways added some volatile fuel to an already burning fire. As discussed in chapter two, Plath is, in the very act of writing, forming a self by the impression, the character, of her writing. She is creating a narrative of her life through her work in the manner we have laid out, but the intense complications arise when we understand that she is *literally* narrating her life within her work as well. The implications are then much greater, and the importance of her incongruencies, her paradoxes, either by art criticism or by literal content of her work, rises to the top of not just our conversation of Plath's work, but our conversation of Plath herself, as they render the two not just inseparable but nearly identical. What is ultimately revealed is that Plath did not have a premonition of her discourse, but rather created it.

The Bell Jar's self-referential nature manifests itself not solely in the actual plot, i.e. that Esther is a stand in for Plath's own real life experiences, but in references to Plath's other work, as well as the very creation of the novel itself. The ironic beat of "I am, I am, I am." (*TBJ,* Plath, 244) closely resembles both the stylistic repetition within "Daddy" but more specifically the "I" of "Ich, ich, ich, ich." (*Ariel*, "Daddy", Plath, 57) A metaphor in speaking German links the two as well, "The tongue stuck in my jaw./It stuck in a barb wire snare." (*Ariel,* 56-8) and "What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam." (*TBJ,* 33) Even clearer reference exists in Esther's "... I was only purely happy until I was nine years old," (*TBJ*, 75) in comparison to Plath's "I was ten when they buried you" (*Ariel*, 58) and "The first time it happened I was ten," (7) in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" respectively. Admittedly, the lines are different by one year, and Plath's father died when she was 8, but the point stands. (Wagner-Martin, 28) Esther's suicide attempt too is seen in Plath's poems. The hole in the cellar wall that Esther seals herself in takes the form of "The grave cave" (*Ariel,* 6), a spot of one of many deaths. In a far more tongue-in-cheek example, we return to Esther's ambition to write a novel:

> A feeling of tenderness filled my heart. My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing. (*TBJ*, 120)

One can't help but imagine a slight grin on Plath's face as she imagined the reader, almost uncontrollably, counting the letters in Sylvia on their hand. It certainly seems a lucky thing, doesn't it? Plath had fun with *The Bell Jar*. Its satire in relation to psychiatry is noticeable throughout, and when stepping back it takes on a new layer of satire, that of authorship, or, more specifically, what it means to be 'fiction'. Plath is completely aware of what a moment like the

above does, completely aware when she wrote her *Ariel* poems and *The Bell Jar*, whenever they may have come chronologically, that readers of both would see these relationships and begin to question just what was going on. *The Bell Jar* is written as fiction, yet autobiographical, self-referential, and intertwined both in language and themes with many of her *Ariel* poems, and yet they consistently avoid pinning down. Esther's "It seemed a lucky thing" is as much hers as Plath's, and their inseparability is the very crux of the matter. Plath's heralded two works, what even Wikipedia lists as "Notable", *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* are written in this way because they are Plath's constructed self, her carefully created legacy. They have not only shaped Plath as an author, but shaped Plath as a legend, a person, and a self. In connecting her own literal life, her literal self, to her created work like this, she aestheticizes her experience, makes a spectacle of her life, and takes absolute pleasure in it. There is no better a place to turn now than "Lady Lazarus".

Life from death is the first of the paradoxes within Plath's work that will be discussed in this chapter, and is laid out in theatrical grandeur with "Lady Lazarus". The throughline of death begins at the very start of the poem, "I have done it again./One year in every ten/I manage it—" (*Ariel*, 6) sets the reader into wondering, manage what? Cut off before the answer is given, it is only revealed later with, "This is Number Three,/What a trash/To annihilate each decade." (7) "Number Three" calls to mind Plath's suicide at thirty and her suicide attempt at twenty, the latter mentioned explicitly:

> 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. (7)

In a quote previously mentioned, the first in the trio was her father's death at, a very easily arguable, ten, likely manipulated for the poetics of "One year in every ten/I manage it—" (6) It is worth mentioning the suggested change here between the second and the third. To say that the second time was "... meant/To last it out and not come back at all" means not only was the first time not done with intention of 'full death', per se, but the third was not either. The image of "seashell", the voices that "had to call and call", and the suggestion that "worms" acted as "sticky pearls" not only is disgusting in a way much of the poem's imagery is, but ties that disgustingness to things that are treasures. Pearls and seashells are rarities, at times commodities. This equation, horror to treasure, is pivotal to the rest of the poem, as the calls of those who found her during this second death transform into cheers of "The peanut-crunching crowd" (7) and death becomes spectacle. She herself becomes "opus", literal art, "valuable", "The pure gold baby," (9) a mesmerizing and desirable entity through aestheticizing death in what ultimately is a performance.

Plath sets about characterizing herself in all manner of horror, her skin "Bright as a Nazi lampshade," body lopsided with "A paperweight" for a right foot, her face "a featureless, fine/Jew linen." (6) Not only simply possessing odd body-proportions, the outside of the body is a representation of a type paradox, both "Nazi" and "Jew", ultimately creating a figure that is evoking the horrors of the Holocaust. A single entity made of a pairing of two opposites, a nearly unmentionable combination, creates a conceptual terror. But it doesn't end there, Plath continues to a more physically disturbing description, invoking the imagery of a corpse. Both requested and, perhaps, commanded, the reader is made to "Peel off the napkin" and mocked in a way with, "Do I terrify?—" (6) as what follows is, ultimately, pretty decidedly terrifying. Tied to that

first attempt on her life, and thus one of her deaths, she has been changed, "The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?/The sour breath/Will vanish in a day." This horrible image, this body transformed by death, "...the flesh/The grave cave ate…" (6) will, or perhaps has, become "At home" on her, and she will appear no more than "a smiling woman." She will be, from here onward, a normalized embodiment of death. Not only, however, is it embodied, brought into her normal being, brought into her self, but it is *mastered*, made an art, with confident and exciting assertion:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call. (8)

Death is a skill to be mastered, and, beyond that, it is a performance, "an art." Plath is taking complete ownership of death, and in doing so complete ownership of an art form and self. What "feels like hell," what is horror and pain, is something to be *done*, something to be acted, something that "feels real" only by the performance, by the artistic creation. There is no worth in a death that is "easy" (8), i.e. done "in a cell" unseen, (8) or done and simply left at that. "It's the theatrical," Plath decrees, "That knocks me out." (8) The theatrical is her game, the aestheticized death that she has mastered, is seemingly *destined* to embody, is also a state of power. "Herr God, Herr Lucifer,/Beware/Beware" (9) is an assertion of that power, a seat at the table of both God and the Devil. Perhaps the demarcation of good and evil, as one may metaphorically assume from Satan and God, is a way of suggesting occupancy in both those spaces, a wielding of both evil and good in this mastery of death. This is some type of all-powerfulness, but I don't believe

it's value ends there. What can also be extrapolated is a sandwiching of the world, God, the Devil, above, below, the world as we know it contained within two polarities. In asserting mastery of death, mastery of an art form, then calling out to those two polemics, Plath is grabbing hold of a *place* in that system, one outside of, if not in contest with, the traditional axis of power. Artistic expression thus resulting in an a strong formation of self, a place, perhaps taken or perhaps created, within the world as that created self.

There is, of course, the previously mentioned aspect of becoming a kind of treasure in this act, "I am your valuable,/The pure gold baby" (9), and the implications of this are a great part of the haunting nature of "Lady Lazarus," and ultimately creating one of the most powerful aspects of Plath's poem. Plath's language invokes a sense of commodification of the self, the self that the poem creates. This coupled with the aestheticizing of death, the creation of spectacle, as a way of forming self forms a kind artistic thesis on what is ultimately the broader subject of this paper. In art there is a created self, and Plath, as with many of her best moments, is well aware of this. There are a few stanzas which demand our attention:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot—
> The big strip tease.
> [...] (7)

Images of celebrity, a "million filaments", either of lights or the flashes of cameras, a "peanut-crunching crowd" that "Shoves" in excitement. A massive consuming body piles in to witness "The big strip tease," mirrors, perhaps, the very thing that this project itself is in some ways doing. Unpacking what Plath was trying to create here, observing her spectacle, tying it it

fervently to her life and her self, looking for similarities and differences… This is within "Lady Lazarus" what amounts to a type of trap. At first it is referred to somewhat vaguely, that "For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge/For the hearing of my heart— It really goes." (8) A charge, in a commercial sense, could be monetary exchange of some kind, which slots itself very nicely into the idea of a commodified spectacle, something to be viewed and consumed. But, I would point to two stanzas in the closing moments of the poem which push "a charge" in a different direction:

> Ash, ash—
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—
> [...]
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air. (9)

These two stanzas, while separated within the poem itself, are directly linked and bring a second meaning forward. "A charge", now, can be punishment. Firstly, what has, throughout the poem, been a treasure is burned to "ash," and now "there is nothing there—", even despite searching the remains. If we were to stop there, the punishment would be that treating the self as spectacle would result in a complete, and in this case literal, combustion of it, rendering it to nothing. But, as one may expect in a poem that uses the mastery of death as an art *through which* to form a self, that is not where this metaphor ends, in fact it transitions to likely the most apt metaphor possible, that of the phoenix. "I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.", she decrees, from these prodden remains a fiery and destructive, powerful self emerges. The charge, now, is one of being burned by curiosity. Searching for something within the ash, looking for hints and clues, valuables, through which we can construct some understanding of the spectacle has resulted in

being hurt. While this greatly mirrors the controversies surrounding Plath's life, searching for biographical secrets within her work that reveal some truth of her life, it also asserts a level of awareness from Plath *of* that circumstance, one that borderlines on premonition. One can only imagine, along the lines of the "It seemed a lucky thing." (*TBJ*, 120) in *The Bell Jar*, that Plath purposefully did this. That in the ownership of death and the claiming of aestheticization within the poem, Plath is intentionally creating a legacy and furor around her poems. In a moment of immense artistry, Plath creates a multilayered paradox by which her self is made inseparable from her work and carries onward, creating life not just *from* death, but life *in* death.

I'd like to go into more detail into what I mean by paradox here. First, for clarity's sake, I will restate the principle paradoxes: (1) Plath has created life in death and (2) created fictional works, be it poem or novel, that intertwine with non-fiction in an inseparable manner. Both have been detailed extensively in one way or another, and I am of the firm belief at this point that it is at the least on the precipice of undeniability. But the question arises of why this is the case? There is, in a somewhat serendipitous way, an extremely apt concept from Cleanth Brooks which he refers to as and within *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Brooks suggests that the very "language of poetry is the language of paradox," (Brooks, 3) and it is in this language that the truth of poetry is uttered, and as such it "can be approached only in terms of paradox." (3) Normal words, per se, or a conventional way of combining them into language, lacks what poetry can describe, it is in using paradox that "the important things which the poet has to say" are ultimately utterable. (16) For Brooks, poems are "well-wrought urns" (19), which function as containers for paradox, for, what he calls, "the ashes of a phoenix":

> But there is a sense in which all such well-wrought urns contain the ashes of a phoenix. The urns are not meant for memorial purposes only, though that often seems to be their chief significance to the professors of literature. The phoenix rises from its ashes; or ought to rise; but it will not arise for all our mere sifting and measuring the ashes, or testing them for their chemical content. We must be prepared to accept the paradox of imagination itself; else "Beautie, Truth, and Raritie" remain enclosed in their cinders and we shall end with essential cinders, for all our pains. (19-20)

The language here is obviously quite familiar. The paradox is the material through which life is created and the monument of its death. More inquiry into the exact nature of it, its specificity, trying to de-paradox it, will not result in the ultimate meaning of a poem. This is pertinent to Plath, yes, as it is a strategy she is employing, but the "sifting", "measuring" and "testing" are, in many ways, *included* in Plath's paradox. They are part of its language. Brooks mimics the language of Anthony Rudd; the "continuous process" (Rudd, 3) of shaping the self is also part of poetry. In using paradox, "The poet… has to make up his language as he goes," his "terms are continually modifying each other…" (Brooks, 8) Plath is using this paradox in this exact way, to create the sense of self that has carried on long after her death.

This isn't to say that there are no complications, of course. "Daddy", our second and final poem from *Ariel*, was a source of problems in chapter 2. Revisiting it here will clarify *why* "Daddy" has the complications it does, and perhaps provide greater context as to Plath's goals with the poem itself.

A very similar paradox presents itself here as in "Lady Lazarus", the intrinsic relation to Plath's biographical life, as well as an aestheticized creation of self that is not conducive with those biographical ties. There is the reference to the 'three acts of death', "I was ten when they buried you./At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you/I thought even the bones

would do," *(Ariel*, 58) as well as the particularly intriguing set of stanzas that evokes thoughts of her relationship with Ted Hughes:

> But they pulled me out of the sack,
> And they stuck me together with glue.
> And then I knew what to do.
> I made a model of you,
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
> [...]
> If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
> The vampire who said he was you
> And drank my blood for a year,
> Seven years, if you want to know.
> Daddy, you can lie back now.
>
> There's a stake in your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always *knew* it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. (58-59)

This is trio of stanzas warrants a look before progressing. First, it is necessary to make not of the potential for replacement within the poem. It stands within reason that if "a model" of this father figure had been made, replaced with "A man in black with a Meinkampf look" that the "Daddy" referred to in the other two stanzas can be referring to that model. It is at least the case that Plath wants the reader to be unsure, making certain to keep the "man in black" relevant with "If I've killed one man, I've killed two—", describing him as a "vampire" that fed for "Seven years", which was give or take the length of her relationship with Ted Hughes. With the attachment to this vampire, the "Daddy" we knew before "can lie back", can step aside, as his place has been taken. Now the final stanza, it seems, is in reference to the "man in black." Because the reader is now drawing connection between Hughes and this figure, the final stanza has, in another form of

haunting premonition, a distinct relevance to modern discourse. A sudden questioning of Ted Hughes's role, what he has to hide, if anything at all. The "villagers never liked" him, they "always *knew*" it had been him, a suggestion perhaps that this is a group reacting in hindsight. The "stake" in his "fat black heart" could be a metaphorical reduction of power, or maybe simply a death sentence. Plath *knows* the suggestions behind what she has written, *knows* exactly what the public will see, and, again, has basically shaped the discussion around her, her legacy, and her self.

That being said there are the problems of dissimilarity that were touched on earlier in the paper. For this, I will return to a controversial set of stanzas:

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew.
> [...]
> I have always been scared of *you*,
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
> And your neat moustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—
>
> Not God but a swastika
> So black no sky could squeak through.
> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you. (57)

This certainly isn't the only example of Holocaust imagery, but it is one of the most disturbing. The father figure within this portion of the poem is equated to, while perhaps never directly said, a Nazi. The "*you*" which Plath has "always been scared of" (57) is a possessor of the

"Luftwaffe", the German air force during WWII, is a "panzer-man", a man of aggression and war. Direct violence, "The boot in the face" of an Aryan-eyed "Fascist", are all qualities that create the feeling of constraint, of impending demise, of being on a train bound for "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." She embodies that group with "I think I may well be a Jew." This is not exactly the picture of a wonderful father. What is immediate in the mind here is abuse, a totalitarian rule over a household, violent and strict, hopeless even. But the reality of Plath's father was he was quite aloof, never an abusive man, and in the last few months of his life quite sickly and feeble. (Wagner-Martin, 25-6) Dissonance, then, is the name of the game here, while Plath's metaphorical movements have revealed a profound understanding and manipulation of the self she projected into the world, she also has run into an issue of who she was at the time. This is also something that I believe she knew, and early on in the poem Plath sets the stage for what it is exactly she's doing with this dissonance:

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.
>
> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> [...] (*Ariel*, 56)

Where she is at present, "For thirty years", is no longer enough. "You do not do" is repeated and tied to the "black shoe" that she inhabits. We can think of this as place, but we can also think of it as self, or history of a self, in many ways the past that may lead to a present self. This past does not do, and in order to remedy that she asserts to the subject at hand, "Daddy, I have had to kill you." This is not literal, though, rather one laced in image. The *image* of her father has had to be killed and reconstructed into fascist with "the brute/Brute heart…" (57) What happens here, then,

is Plath takes firm hold of her self, as she did in "Lady Lazarus", reconstructing it in the manner she saw fit. A manner which causes this great discomfort, this dissonance between a fact of her life and the story of her life that is being told. This then harkens back to Wilde's ideas about art, that "There is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true…" (Wilde, 3) The "reality" of Plath does not lie in purely her biographical truths, but in the conflict between her constructed self and her historical self, per se. Plath engages in an aesthetic construction of her self, but that self is embodied *by* dissonance, by incongruity, by the inability to demarcate what is fiction and what is non-fiction, a self created in paradox, that cannot be expressed otherwise.

I'm reminded of another moment in Wilde, "In point of fact what is interesting about people in good society… is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask." (4) While I think Wilde has very strong perceptions here, in the case of Plath this "mask" is not separable from that "reality that lies behind," they are, in Plath's aestheticization, one and the same. Like Robert Lowell says in the introduction to *Ariel*, "In these poems… Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created…" (*Ariel,* xiii) Plath "*becomes herself"*, yet also "*something imaginary"*, "*wildly*" yet *"subtly"* created. I perhaps understated when I said her self was created *in* paradox. Plath's created self *is* paradox. What Plath has done with her poems, with their ties to her novel, their ties to her life, their artistic nature, their ghostly self-awareness, has formed a complete discourse around her, formed a complete legacy and self. She is at times tongue-and-cheek, at times unconcerned, at times deeply enthralled, and these modes are meant to exist at once, meant to form what she has left behind.

Chapter 5

Closing Remarks

There is a question here, among all that we have explored, that has been skipped over to some degree. When comparing Plath's poems and *The Bell Jar* there is a difference in what can amount to feeling in each work, or sense of perspective. Esther's conclusion in *The Bell Jar* is a bit nebulous. Psychiatric help, as it were, was unable to give her a sense of self, as the closing line suggests that it wasn't really her own agency guiding her forward, "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread…" (*TBJ*, 244) Likely, this is due to her intense rejection of that mode of self, the distinct disdain for motherhood throughout, however she also wasn't able to find a self through her own methods, her own constructions. She was both paralyzed in possibility and rejecting a 'normal' means of constructing selfhood, having the result of an unsatisfying, limbo-esque ending. Esther seems to have lost, in some sense, at the least having gone nowhere. That doesn't paint a good picture of a practice of aestheticization, makes it a fruitless and unsustainable act. Yet, Plath's poems, both in particularity and in general goal, take a distinct ownership of the self, a powerful formation of it. The works were written at the same general time, yet are distinctly different in their impressions. What is there to say on this?

Again, I find myself turning to Wilde, this time for the difference between novel and poem. Since so much of the discussion so far has hinged implicitly on form, at the least how a work is presented, it makes sense to approach the question of why the distinct difference in

philosophy through the most noticeable difference between the works, how they are presented. For Wilde, the novelist had lost sight of what made art artistic, the exaggeration, the lying, what some may call the pizzazz. A novel, as such, during the creative process had become empirical:

> He has not even the courage of other people's ideas, but insists on going directly to life for everything, and ultimately, between encyclopedias and personal experience, he comes to the ground, having drawn his types from the family circle or from the weekly washerwoman, and having acquired an amount of useful information from which never, even in his most meditative moments, can he thoroughly free himself.
> [...]
> He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination, as indeed they would be fatal to the imagination of anybody, and in a short time he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth telling, begins to verify all statements made in his presence, has no hesitation in contradicting people who are much younger than himself, and often ends by writing novels which are so like life that no one can possibly believe in their probability. (Wilde, 2-3)

As quoted in the previous chapter, there is a possibility of "robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true," (3) and an empirical approach does just that. There is a problem with these "careless habits of accuracy", this "useful information." It is a constraint on the imagination, and thus a constraint on the art. A novel brings along with it a certain set of expectations. There would be human conversation, thought, actions and reactions, a general empirical reality to what is being told. Its contents are, essentially speaking, things that a reader will see as *actual*, as taking place in the world. This is something that has been essential to aestheticization, of course, particularly in regards to Sylvia Plath, and it also explains this dissonance between Plath's novels and poems. The idea that a novel is, at least in the time of Wilde, too true to be true, is itself a paradox, something that by now we are quite used to, but that is not the explanation for the difference in Plath's work, rather, it simply lies in Wilde's concept.

That *The Bell Jar* is a novel means it must adhere to limitations that 'reality', as it stands the empirical world, places on truth. As such, Esther is left in this defeated limbo *because* living a life completely self-authored is an impossible task within the confines of our reality. We, as individuals, would be confronted with too many constraints, too many strict confines, to actually live a life where we fully construct ourselves as one would a piece of art. The oddity, yet at the same time total logical conclusion, is that Plath finds a way to actually accomplish this using her poems. Like Brooks' well-wrought urn, like Wilde's assertion that "Lying and poetry are arts" (3), the form where one can be free of those constraints, where one can really construct a self, create a narrative, a personhood as one would art, to aestheticize the self, is within the paradox of poetry. This is an extremely abstract assertion, some may read this as almost nonsensical, and I believe that is part of the point. It *is* somewhat nonsensical, yet it is simultaneously completely sensical. That is the very nature of poetry, it would seem, particularly in the case of Plath. In a more general, zoomed out way, in all of Plath's pursuit of an individually created self, her usage of paradox, form, interconnectedness, manipulation of her works, to almost completely shape the discussion around her, she has touched upon a greater question of the medium itself.

Before closing completely on this paper, there is one final elephant in the room which must be discussed. My hope is that, in reading this, you have perhaps come to wonder some of the same things as I. There is an uncanniness to the work selected for this paper, one that inspires a somewhat morbid line of thinking. Perhaps, if this has popped into your mind as well, you too are struck with the uncomfortable awe that Plath inspires. If you have not, let me clarify what I mean. Seeing how interconnected her work is, in the message, the particular language, the very

fact of what she chose to write, the impressions that they leave behind, can't help but bring to mind a question of intention following Plath's actions in life. I find myself wondering just how long Plath knew she was going to kill herself, how much it was a factor in her intentional movements towards forging her self. Life *from* death. The whole business is so terribly difficult to speak of. It is my impression that the question of why is this such an uncomfortable thought is one worthy of exploration.

There is danger here in glorifying suicide in seeing it as an act of self-authorship. It is not my intention to do so, and I have tried to be careful not to do that during the course of this paper. In reading Plath, in exploring these concepts within her context, we are presented with evidence at times that is so overwhelmingly convincing in a poetic way that it is hard to think an artist such as Plath was would *not* intentionally be doing what she's doing. I have no delusions of some psychological diagnosis of some kind via literary analysis, but I think it very well could have been the case with Plath that it was all part of the greater creation of self she sought. That, when it came down to it, it *all* was interconnected in those final years. It all *could* very well be coincidental, it could be "a lucky thing" (*TBJ*, 77), in a dark and twisted way, or it could simply seem that way. Although the term has become somewhat tired at this point, there is yet another paradox here, and it may very well contribute to the discomfort. Socially, we would define suicide as a hopeless act, one that is done either in face of inevitability or in a state of such intense pain that one cannot move forward. As Plath has characterized it, and if we are to accept has *used* it, is as an act of inherent hope, or at the very least done with hope behind it. There is no certainty that following her death all the pieces she had laid out would come together in the manner she wished, but she would, at base, *hope* they would. Hope in a hopeless act, life from

death. In this case, it would be just that, an act, something not *done* but *performed*. We are reminded, ultimately in these closing moments, of the reason Esther failed. Actually *living* a self-authored life is impossible, the pull of a societal formation of self— determination versus construction— is too strong to avoid. It would seem, in the case of Plath, the solution to that was authoring one's *death*.

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