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Sylvia Plath’s Traditionalism

Frederick Buell

Sylvia Plath’s characterization of The Bell Jar as a potboiler is certainly too harsh; its sensationalism and its topicality, along with its thinly veiled autobiographical reference, have, however, contributed to a surprising delay in thorough critical appreciation of her finest poetry. Now that Letters Home has been published, the tendency to look at her work solely or primarily in terms of topical and autobiographical contexts will surely be reinforced. A judicious reading of The Bell Jar and a careful use of Letters Home can, I believe, reveal much that is important about her poetry, if, however, primary attention is given to her dialogue, as poet, with the central tradition of literary modernism, the tradition of post-Romantic, symbolist writing. It is in this context that I would like to make some comments first about The Bell Jar and Letters Home; my main concern is to show how Plath, in her finest poetry, managed to re-enliven post-Romantic, symbolist assumptions about art at the same time that she brought them to some of their furthest conceivable limits.

What seems to me to be the real center of power of The Bell Jar is less its explicit plot than it is the consciousness and the narrative voice of
the novel. As with Plath’s best poems (in which her representation of anxiety and lucid horror attains a far greater maturity and universality), one feels that the opening sentences contain, if only in their tone, the fatality and stasis that will thereafter be made explicit:

it was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers — goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.1

In this passage, as in the most intense moments throughout the novel, Esther reveals herself as vulnerably, anxiously, and obsessively self-conscious, yet with a frightening lack of an inner, stable “self”; external events are caught in the web of an intense and ruthlessly analytic self-awareness, one which is anxiously preoccupied with an insufficiency or a vacancy where a self should be. One feels that Esther is constantly on the verge of being spiritually annihilated by the disparate pressures of the unstable world around her; as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that these outside pressures are far less intense than the way in which her self-consciousness turns them inward upon herself. She lives, save in the scenes with Dr. Nolan, in complete emotional isolation, unable to find or realize herself within any of the surrounding social contexts; at best, she tries to cope with this introspective anxiety and isolation by means of the American myth of solitarily-won success, but the more intelligently analytical she becomes about her own fierce, injured ambition, the more painfully she returns to her own insufficiency and nothingness.

While at college, Esther could cope, albeit precariously, with pressures that, in contrast to those surrounding her in New York, were more reified in the demands of a cloistered and tightly structured environment; here, she could “succeed” so brilliantly as to establish herself in others’ eyes, if not — as was the case with her success, and the resultant anxiety and guilt, at escaping Chemistry — in her own. In New York, however, she encountered such a multiplicity of standards for success — none of which was absolute, and all of which were in large part sham — and people with such a multiplicity of talents, that the experience became spiritually nauseating.2 She could find no social structure which was central, no one achievement which was the one thing to attain, as good marks were for her in college; she could find no way to master her
environment and her own inner anxiety about her identity by dint of the dehumanizing ascetic labor she required of herself in college. She realized in New York that all her preparatory labors did not ready her for competing in the larger, more chaotically uncentered "real" world. She felt suddenly how completely unprepared for it she was; indeed, her laborious preparations had only made things more difficult for her.

Her agony of self-consciousness and self-appraisal was based, however, on something far more demanding than mere ambition — the attainment of some admired position for purposes of self-exaltation — not because she was more selfless than this, but because she was incomparably more anxiously preoccupied with herself. Behind her drive to success was a more-than-worldly drive to self-perfection: perfection both in her experience of all (particularly the extremes) in life and in the invulnerability of an attained mastery of that experience. Short of this, whatever she achieved would be quickly annihilated by a new awareness of still more beyond her reach — as if an intensely puritanic consciousness had to redeem itself, alone, without help, from time and multiplicity. The aloneness, the solipsism, of this attempt was well imaged in the book's central symbol and title.

This pattern is presented more poignantly and naively in Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*. The letters reveal the willfulness with which the novel was written: the novel (its first part, at least) was an exercise in systematic disillusionment, an almost point by point reevaluation and rejection of the yearnings, hopes, and values that had, in enthusiasm and dejection alike, guided her life as a student in high school and college and as a young married woman. The letters are an essential document of what is now called *the* fifties — or what, more exactly, would be middle class white, especially WASP, America, seen through the eyes of its young people, during the fifties — written by someone who gradually was forced to understand and undergo the demands of her uncommonly intense spirituality, a spirituality that was internally torn and compromised by the society that placed such homely and excruciatingly secular limitations on it.

Always behind the painfully homely fifties Americana of the letters lay an impulse to self-perfection that was — if only in the unexamined intensity with which "Sivvy" attempted to meet and transform the values of her time — the troubled indication of her later understandings. Success, popularity, and marriage, and the frequently expressed desire for a rich, full, well-rounded life were the terms that her society and her environment gave her to understand and guide her yearnings; these goals were finally unable to contain the energy of will that lay behind them. Plath bitterly experienced the paradox of the ideal of the well-rounded, the cheerily happy, and the successful person who, however, had to earn these qualities by dint of lonely and self-denying self-conscious labor in a host of different (and trivial) fields — clothing, poise,
friendliness, etc. This paradox was particularly vivid to anyone from a socially marginal background — just to be a scholarship girl at Smith put one in that agony of hopefulness and struggle; or to anyone at all unusual in physical appearance — at fifteen Plath had grown to the unusual height of five feet nine inches; or to anyone, particularly a woman, with ambitions out of the ordinary — from a very early age Plath was committed to becoming a writer. Perhaps the most terse and absolute way of putting this paradox is that one had to appear, more, to be perfectly natural, a perfection of naturalness. One had to strike always just the right casual tone, one had to have the right boyfriend without visibly struggling to get him; those who struggled in society — those trying to overcome disadvantages and “inferiority complexes” — and those who struggled in schoolwork (the grinds) were excluded on sight. In terms of Western religiosity, this paradox is intolerable; the human will, and the realm of moral activity it occasions, is meant to direct itself toward something higher than and prior to nature, especially the “nature” conceived in the fifties as smiling, optimistic, materially successful happiness. Plath was under especially great strain by virtue of her intensity; she went after these all too secular and limited goals with an energy and desire that only a more than natural world could contain. Her cry upon being rescued from her attempted suicide — “Oh, if I only could be a freshman again. I so wanted to be a Smith woman” — contains a poignancy that is also excruciating in the extreme poverty and worldliness of the thing to which she attached her intense desire (LH, 126). Equally excruciating and poignant are the expressions of painfully hopeful enthusiasm with which her letters abound; one feels behind them a will and ambition — a force that Yeats would call antithetical — that no natural goal could contain. More ominously, one begins to feel that these desires not only threaten to explode traumatically beyond nature, but also that the more they focus blindly upon natural good — happiness brought about through success — the more unnatural, even perverse, they become in themselves. Behind the American myth of success that produces natural happiness is concealed the reality of the bell jar: an utter solipsism, a capacity for extreme self-laceration in failure, and even a certain demonic tincture to the will occasioned by both success and failure. The epithet “self-made” is revelatory of these things: to a religious understanding, it is an extreme of blasphemy. Its pathetic side is its loneliness — particularly in the self-conscious, mutually inspecting, conformist America of the fifties; its demonic side is its willful solipsism and its pride of self-causation, available in both failure and success.3

Within these paradoxical fifties values, Plath sought what she articulated often as success and therefore happiness and what, in moments of greater self-knowledge, she articulated as self-perfection. Whether by chance or by design, the crises in her life revealed to her the incompatability of these two goals. Her letters, filled with resurgent
beginnings, enthusiasms, visions of new programs of action that would complete and perfect her and also bring success and happiness of a kind yet untasted, a kind at last real and permanent, show how the two goals were able to remain uneasily compatible as long as she felt her life lay before her in prospectiveness, that somewhere soon doors would be unlocked, that she had just found out at last the way to begin ordering her life so as to be fruitful in natural life as well as in ambition: as long as she could retain this prospectiveness — at the cost, to be sure, of assuming her own naivete and immaturity — she had the resilience to withstand the disillusionment that followed upon the heels of enthusiasm. The moments in her life when she lost this resilience occurred when the shock of a disillusionment was too encompassing: first, when her shock at discovering the unencompassable multiplicity of New York City coincided with a number of other frustrations, and second, when her marriage to Ted Hughes, a marriage that seemed at last to reconcile will and nature, ambition for self-perfection, success, and life, collapsed. That this aspect of her marriage exhilarated her is clear from the letters; magically, their relationship touched off in both of them a burst of creativity deeper than before, and they seemed to be able to lead each other into artistic as well as human fulfillment. Revelatory of this and the strain it could also cause was the letter in which Plath announced to her mother that at last she had written happy poems and that some new acceptances were examples of “what true love can produce”; equally double-edged was the later letter in which Plath justified her (by contemporary standards) mildly atypical lifestyle: “when we are both wealthy and famous, our work will justify our lives, but now our lives and faith must justify themselves” (LH, 274, 343).

What happened in Plath’s moments of breakdown was that life, natural existence, lost all radiance and became the maze of dislocated sensations and sensationalisms into which a haunted Esther found herself placed — or, more profoundly, a Belsen in which a full, conscious being was imprisoned fully aware, a state Plath depicted in the later, extreme poems. In this torment, Plath was left alone with her conscious will, which now fully apprehended itself as unnatural. The terms for this unnaturalness broadened immensely: they grew out of the fifties social horror of failure. In it, failure meant that “no one would find me interesting or valuable” and that, like a piece the Ladies’ Home Journal had rejected, “I begin to feel that / lack that ‘indefinable something’ that makes a winner” (LH, 133, 156). One would be, to expand the terms beyond these contexts, absolutely isolated from human community and nature, left alone in self-consciousness of this unnatural isolation; the sensation of knowledge self-consciousness brings would be a product and a symptom, perhaps also a cause, of this unnaturalness. The rest of the world — save for the anti-community of aware victims — would be stupidly happy; the conscious would be intelligent, but damned and tormented. A
bitter exaltation would be possible in this knowledge: in so far as the knowledge was of failure, a perverse remorse and even pride, which claimed a perfection of its own failure and therefore negatively overcame all mere nature within oneself (spontaneity) and without (external accident), would be available, and, in so far as the knowledge was purified of personal failure and transformed into a realization of the unnaturlness of all human consciousness, it would have the perverse power of a vision from the underworld, the real fallen state of humankind, a vision others were too fearfully or stupidly naive to see. A negative kind of perfection would be possible: a perfection of anti-natural consciousness. In this state, consummately realized in Plath’s later poetry, the possessor of such knowledge would become a visionary with a gnostic hatred of nature combined, however, with the equally strong awareness that there was no saving gnosis. Examples of Plath’s gnosticism abound in the later poetry; to pick one of the more straightforward, in “A Birthday Present,” nature, imaged as clouds, becomes “veils” that are “killing my days,” although “To you they are only transparencies, clear air.” At best, nature, described in rhetoric that is a conscious echoing and inversion of D. H. Lawrence’s, is imaged as a barbarous, in itself beautiful, vitality from which human consciousness is isolated and by which it is threatened (examples are “Tulips” and “Poppies in July”). The awareness in Plath that there is no saving gnosis (even in suicide, contrary to the beliefs of extreme dualists — from those of the East, such as the Jains, to those of the West, such as the thirteenth-century Catharists — who legitimized voluntary death as a religious act) reveals itself most completely in the poems of greatest extremity, such as “Lady Lazarus”; in them, anti-natural perfection is shown to be a sterile, solipsistic ideal, located nowhere, and visible only in the totality with which the visionary willfully dehumanizes and annihilates the natural. The final twist of the knife is that Plath makes a matter-of-fact and clear-sighted moral appraisal of this process: the process of revelation is judged as ethically abhorrent — not only because it is destructive but also because it is anti-natural, and thus forever inauthentic, falsely posturing — as the revelation itself is cynical in its message. The secularity of will in the America of the fifties, the decay of all supernatural focus for its energies, thus gave Plath’s idealism no locus in scripture or human tradition.

Especially for a woman with desires larger than the allowed social objectives, the experience of unnaturulness would be thorough-going and intense. Insofar as womanhood was identified with natural richness, the experience of an opposite force within would be terrible. This is what looms ominously behind one of the hopeful comments Plath, trying to temporize her imagination, made in her letters:

I cannot draw well or write exceptionally, but I feel now so far beyond that perfectionist streak which would be
flawless or nothing — now I go on in my happy-go-lucky way and make my little imperfect worlds in pen and typewriter and share them with those I love. (LH, 228)

Imperfection, sharing, love — these are linked with brittle cheerful acceptance by someone who would later be driven, or liberated, into willful attainment, in poetry, of their opposites. Her old problem of perfectionism, which she recognized as one of the causes of her first breakdown, was closely allied with the terrifying fulfillment of her vocation as an imaginative writer, a vocation that revealed itself more absolutely and monomaniacally when her life fell to pieces around her. Formal perfection in poetry appeared to be the willed attainment of conscious unnaturalness, a flawless and dehumanized perfection that revealed itself in the completeness with which — in the world without and within — it terrorized the natural.

We can now return briefly to The Bell Jar to look at the two figures who flank Esther at the beginning of her stay in New York: they represent opposed possibilities, and it would not be forcing the issue too much to read them as emblems for two kinds of creativity. Though attracted to “Pollyanna Cowgirl” as a kind of lost hope for innocence, she could not hope as a self-conscious writer to remain in that state. In New York, the naturalness of Pollyanna Cowgirl was only a public-relations image, manipulated cynically by urban advertising men; even her writing teacher would have called it factitious. As with the world of suburban normality in the book, the superficial, apparently innocent image was a trivializing deception, cynically manipulated, hiding a nausea and terror behind it; once that reality had become known, Esther could find no way to return to whatever innocence — or better, nostalgia for innocence — she may have had.

One might look to Doreen as an emblem of an alternate possibility for poetry: a poetry of sophisticated decadence as opposed to graceful, trivial, inauthentically naive verse. But this decadence, with its cultivation of a fallen, inauthentic world of manipulated form, in which the word “factitious” would indicate superiority rather than inadequacy, was impossible for Esther, even though it attracted her strongly; it was morally nauseating as well as practically unattainable. Against the decadence of Doreen we must place the voice of cynicism in Plath’s later poetry, a voice resonant with the superiority of someone who is willfully unnatural and therefore knowing, yet also familiarly aware of such superiority as self-destructive and even cheap, a mere pose. If Esther is still too afraid, naive, and awkward to become another Doreen, Plath is in her later poetry too accomplished and too knowing; decadence fails to satisfy the demands not just of her conscience but also of her withering judgment about the cultivated impotence of merely aesthetic gestures — that is, her demand that poetry satisfy a reality-hunger, even when the reality is con-
scious annihilation. From this standpoint, the world of advertising is perverted not in its falsification of experience, but in the blandness and tameness with which it falsifies: it is simply not perverted with enough conscious intensity and intelligence to be truly powerful. Consider how much more powerful an understanding of the unnatural a failed suicide attempt gives; one returns from it with an increased consciousness of isolation and a frightening power over oneself which arises from the fact that one has been capable of one of the most extreme anti-natural acts. Consider then how such knowledge might be expressed in a dehumanized aesthetic such as the one that Esther wished she had voiced to Buddy, a belief that the immortality of poems can make them perfect, unlike natural men, who, though temporarily curable by supposedly humanistic doctors, are really only dust. Poetic form would be, in this aesthetic, more than inorganic; it would be anti-organic.

In The Bell Jar, Esther’s attempted suicide does not produce an extreme of fallen self-control and self-knowledge. Insofar as she is a diminished projection of Sylvia Plath, far more naive than one feels her author is, she cannot. One reason for this is that the novel represents, as the later poetry does not, a desire to avoid this self-recognition and to attain a conditionally happy end. It also means that the novel was still written out of self-therapeutic hopefulness, in a way that the later poetry will explicitly negate. The shock of the most extreme later poetry is that of encountering a person — better, a persona, if one uses that word with a reserve of contempt for the unnaturalness of critical jargon — who has irremediably decided on things: one for whom consciousness is unnatural, and will and rational intelligence are the capacity to heighten such awareness, to act it out to its fullest.

In its fullest, most fallen form, such consciousness would approach the absolute poetry Plath came to write. It would create the illusion of having attained a sort of total knowledge: that there was no kind of experience — even despair — that it had not had, as in “Elm” (“I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:/ It is what you fear./ I do not fear it: I have been there”), or had and thereby finished with, as in “Cut” (“What a thrill —/ My thumb instead of an onion”) (A, 15, 13). The late poems of W. B. Yeats seem humane by comparison: behind their stoic fatalism is an affirmation of the wheel of time, however inexorably repetitive it is. Yeats has a gnosis, however grim; Plath has none, and her will is just as powerful and intact in destructive knowledge as Yeats’s is in fatalism. This fallen consciousness would contain no capacity for hopeful growth: either there would be terrible stasis or intensification (as at the end of “Lady Lazarus” and “Stings”). Spontaneity would be impossible; it would be shunned as the superficial innocence of “Pollyanna Cowgirl” was. Likewise, benign contentment, harmony with self, and all mere naturalness would be impossible; to live thus would be to live like Dodo Conway, the most contemptuously treated
character in *The Bell Jar*. Instead, the self-tyranny implicit in fallen self-knowledge would have to be made absolute: by tyrannizing her ordinary, flawed, natural self, she would achieve a dehumanized poetic voice and lyrical “I” that would fix, freeze, and ultimately annihilate her natural self, and would take into its active energy by virtue of its finer, prouder, consciously unnatural tyranny all the inhumanity of fallen, determined life. It would self-destructively transcend fate by wreaking for itself a more powerful internalized fatality.

Plath’s major work, then, seems to vacillate reliably between two kinds of extreme images, one kind relating to herself as formed, fixed subject matter, and one kind relating to herself as demonic creator. Either she will image herself (even yearningly) in terms of a frighteningly stupified, static, insensate object, something utterly determined and therefore almost peaceful — examples are “Edge” and “Paralytic” — or she will image herself as the destructively powerful phoenic-witch-bitch-goddess — the best example being the triumphant horror at the end of “Lady Lazarus.” The former type of image may be either a regressive return to purity or the accomplishment that comes on the other side of sensational or psychological violence; the latter image may be seen either in terms of a demonic virginity (as with the hive in “The Bee Meeting” or the “pure acetylene/ Virgin” of “Fever 103”) or in terms of a castrating, self-terrorizing creature of experience (as in “Years” and the ends of “Lady Lazarus” and “Stings”).8 Between these two extremes, we frequently hear the voice of a vacillating consciousness, nervous or desperately naive, tormented without understanding by impinging forces, or even numbed, a consciousness that hopes only for neutrality, invisibility, or even insensitivity (as in “Getting There,” much of “A Birthday Present,” “Tulips,” and “The Arrival of the Bee Box”): it is a precarious wavering between the stasis of insensitivity and the kinetic stasis of full consciousness.

On the aesthetic level, Plath’s poems, at their most intense and therefore absolute, represent the fusion of these extremes: a perfect work of art is one that is dehumanized, antithetical to the suffering natural self, yet created willfully out of and imaginatively destructive of that self. At their best, they represent a dying — better, an annihilation of the “trash” of multiplicity — so conscious that it “feels real,” and they arise out of the blasphemous “call” of suicidal art (A, 7). For their material, they return, obsessively, to Plath’s (often early) personal past, seeking out the most determined data of her natural self, trying to finalize and absolutize these private torments — to render them as impersonal as fate. At their greatest, as in “Lady Lazarus,” these private experiences have been so completely absolutized that personal vision becomes also cosmic: Plath is very serious, I think, when, at the end of the poem, she refers to “Herr God, Herr Lucifer.” The cosmic force that has created matter and consciousness is a totalitarian and destructive one;9 human life is a concentration camp; the
only victory possible is to become as dehumanized as fate and therefore as divine, to “rise with my red hair/ And . . . eat men like air” (A, 9). To triumph over these forces, they must be destructively internalized, made a part of her active will. Such poems are far from confessional in any therapeutic sense: all possible relief is excluded by the completeness of the sarcastic self-knowledge — self-knowledge so certain and familiar it cannot even be expressed with shock and horror, as if it were something new, but only with sarcasm, as something that has become contemptible with familiarity.

II

By now it should be clear that Plath’s work cannot be seen in a literary vacuum, as something unconnected with literary and intellectual trends. Plath’s work must be examined in the context of post-Romantic and symbolist literary tradition, a heterogenous tradition that has, since the classic era of “modern” literature, become so recognizable as to be clichéd. I would argue that it is Plath’s acceptance, conscious or unconscious, of what is most extreme in literary modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that allowed her so devastatingly to generalize her private torments into poetry.

Clearly, Plath’s work stands as a variant of the omnipresent alienation and anxiety felt by modern poets face to face with a world that seemed increasingly dehumanized; this was not just an imaginative reaction to the shock of urbanization and industrialization in the West, but more significantly it was a reaction to a large number of new determinisms — from Darwin, to Marx, to Freud — that man had come to see as controlling not only his behavior but his consciousness as well. The realm of nature, subject to outside determinisms, was extended into man’s inner sanctuary, his consciousness; the risk was that this sanctuary would become dehumanized in the process, would appear as something alien to the self-conscious person. In a consummate irony, human reason succeeded in dehumanizing itself: the new sciences, as well as new technological achievement, had, in promising increased control over environment and self, simultaneously reduced the individual’s experience of freedom and control by uncovering a plurality of social, psychological, political, economic, and physical determinisms. The brunt of this was, on the one hand, to isolate and trivialize sensibility, to alienate man’s consciousness from himself and his world; the result was a character like Eliot’s Prufrock — solipsistic, anxiety-ridden, and spiritually empty. On the other hand, it revealed a vision of the potential of human rationality to produce something inhuman; if one dehumanized oneself, rid oneself of sensibility, moral scruple, and became pure reasoner and controller, then one could produce the inhumanity of modern warfare or the masterful techniques of dehumanization of the concentration camps.10
One can see in Plath many echoes of the Prufrock self-consciousness, the excruciating self-awareness that surrounds an inner void in Esther and the vacillating lyric voice that yearns for neutrality in the poems; much more prevalent is the latter problem, an analytic rationality that is not only an alienation from self but also a willed dehumanization of self. The grim portrayal of dehumanizing science that one finds in writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Gottfried Benn, and William Butler Yeats is one of Plath’s important preoccupations, just as the Third Reich and concentration camps are the source of her most extreme imagery. Plath’s obsession with the demonic side of medical science and the kind of disgusted attention to fleshly physical processes it is capable of producing is one that, because it deals with the human body, makes her absorption of scientific rationality both uniquely lyrical and inhuman. Closest to her in this respect would be the Gottfried Benn of Morgue; the capacity of scientifically objective vision to observe the most disgusting details of physical process reveals itself in “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” and “Mann und Frau gehen durch die Krebsbaracke” alike. With Plath, though, the potential for dehumanization is, if anything, greater than in Benn; for Benn, women still held potential for celebration in that they released men from their self-consciousness, even if into the “bestial transcendence” of organic nature.11 Plath – to whom the myth of woman as natural creature and of sexual intercourse as renaturalization of the imagination was not so available – was far more frighteningly alone with this vision of an objectivity that murders to dissect nature and which itself is perceived with distaste as completely amoral, inhuman. Even more frightening is the fact that Plath, unlike Benn, pictures herself instinctively as the patient as well as the medical observer-manipulator; this fated choice stems not only from the fact that most doctors are men, while women are identified with the spontaneous nature that is to be operated upon, but also from the traditional identification of men as the recipients of the highest knowledge, whether this is, as in Eden, something glorious, or, as in the modern Weltanschauung, in which revelation is no longer believed in, the agony of objective knowledge and self-consciousness. Plath, moreover, in her refusal to allow any area of experience, especially the darkest, to go unexplored, attained for herself the facility and demonic power of the knower with a caustic completeness; she became both patient and doctor, violated known and violating knower. Her ruthless observations of herself – “What a thrill –/ My thumb instead of an onion” – represent a willed objectivity and dehumanization more conscious than Buddy Willard’s colleagues’ manipulation of women in the obstetric ward. She did not divide her human self from her inhuman knowledge, her sensitivity from her rationality; she worked to fuse the two into a self-destructive unity.

Closely related to this vision of science is an aesthetic that stems from Edgar Allan Poe, one that is easily traceable through such writers as
Baudelaire, Valéry, Benn, and T. S. Eliot. Just as the sensation of an absolute, inhuman knowledge is attainable through dehumanization of and alienation from oneself, so absolute poetry, a poetry laden with Satanic, Promethean, and Faustian overtones, is attainable through a dehumanization of the creator and alienation from the creator’s work and audience. The myth of creation in Poe’s pseudoscientific “The Philosophy of Composition” is that of a creator in complete, conscious control over his medium, allowing no accident (or even spontaneity) to interfere with his careful construction of a pure, verbal machine. The poet is, on the one hand, in absolute control of his composition; he is, on the other hand, alienated from the result and solipsistically isolated within his own impersonal consciousness. Moreover, such a poet is, as Gottfried Benn makes clear, alienated from his audience as well: he seeks to write “the absolute poem, the poem without faith. The poem without hope, the poem addressed to no one, the poem made out of words which you assemble in a fascinating way.”\(^\text{12}\)

Much of what this implies — that the formal perfection of a poem is alien, even hostile to life and nature — I have already discussed with regard to Plath. It is noticeable in such diverse areas as Plath’s ability to force herself to live at times — as it appeared to others — flawlessly in the assigned social roles; it is behind Plath’s comment to her husband, when he expressed dismay at the pessimism of “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” that the poem was “an exercise on . . . [a] theme”;\(^\text{13}\) and it lies behind the fearful self-control in the closing lines of “The Disquieting Muses”: “But no frown of mine/ Will betray the company I keep.”\(^\text{14}\)

Against the background of the tradition of “absolute” poetry, however, Plath’s work stands out as a remarkable intensification. Unlike T. S. Eliot, for whom the doctrine of impersonality served the ultimately humane goal of integrating the private sensibility into something, a tradition, larger than any individual talent, Sylvia Plath’s willed dehumanization of voice in her late poetry sought an absoluteness of inhumane solipsism. Like that of the Byzantine art described by T. E. Hulme, form for Plath was ultimately based upon antipathy to the natural world; T. E. Hulme’s description of it is extremely suggestive in this context:

Renaissance art we may call a “vital” art in that it depends on pleasure in the reproduction of human and natural forms. Byzantine art is the exact contrary of this. There is nothing vital in it; the emotion you get from it is not a pleasure in the reproduction of natural or human life. The disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, the searching after an austerity, a perfection and rigidity which vital things can never have, lead here to the use of forms which can
almost be called geometrical. Man is subordinate to certain absolute values: there is no delight in human form, leading to its natural reproduction; it is always distorted to fit into the more abstract forms which convey an intense religious emotion.\(^\text{15}\)

In Plath's most extreme work, the disgust with the "trivial or accidental characteristics of living shapes" is the main thematic concern; the perfection she seeks, however, is not of a realm separate from and superior to nature, but a perfection of disgust at nature, a scathingly matter-of-fact and clear-sighted intellectual satanism, not a religious emotion.

Unlike Poe, who, in his aesthetic theory, separated the provinces of aesthetics and ethics and who thus showed his kinship with "art for art's sake,"\(^\text{16}\) Plath not only refuses to avoid moral self-analysis but also submits herself fully and willfully to it. She does not, like Benn, resort to the formulation of a permanently split identity, a *Doppelleben*, a complete separation of her natural and artistic selves, in order to survive as artist and person; her art grows out of and is enacted upon her natural self. She makes her suicide attempts, in the consciousness and intentionality with which she portrays them as having been done, become, like her poems, works of absolute poetry: "Dying is an art," a work that is performed with conscious, dehumanized, scientific precision and is, obviously, as a finished act, alienated from its creator. She does not perform suicide for suicide's sake, as a form abstracted from reality; her suicides are rich in both formal perfection and content, be it moral, emotional, or realistic-situational content: "I do it so it feels like hell./ I do it so it feels real" (A, 7).

The alienation of poet from audience made explicit in the comment by Benn cited above is something that "Lady Lazarus" also intensifies. While many of Plath's poems can be seen as written from a self-absorption that is indifferent to its audience, "Lady Lazarus" reveals a further possibility, one that comes from her attempt to negate all gratification from the confessional element in her poetry. Since Poe and Baudelaire, the poet's relationship to his audience had become increasingly problematic; vis-à-vis a bourgeois readership, the artist was tempted to see himself alternatively in exalted terms — whether as aristocrat or hermetic poet — and in self-abasing terms — as outcast and contemptible poet, misfit and sterile prophet.\(^\text{17}\) The image of the poet as representative man, one of the great achievements of Romantic literature, had turned sour; at best, this status was held onto in a strangely negative way, in that the dilemma of the poet — vacillating between extremes, alienated from society — was an extreme rendering of the common experience of man in a dehumanized twentieth-century society. In Baudelaire's "La muse venale," we find a rendering of the dilemma of the modern poet as representative outcast that is close to an image in "Lady Lazarus." In it, the poet is pictured as a starving acrobat or clown who must stifle his own tears with
laughter in order to amuse a vulgar crowd; he must repress his feelings and prostitute his art for the sake of the mob in order to be their entertainer and victim simultaneously, thereby revealing to the poem’s reader, in so far as he resists identification with the mob, what has happened to the sensitive person. In Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” she too pictures herself as a circus figure performing for a brutalized crowd. She is, however, a freak as much as she is an acrobat; her performance stems less from external causes — hunger and the social position of the artist — than it does from self-destructive inner demands; there is absolutely no pity in her self-portrayal; and she allows the reader less room to distance himself from identification with the mob, those who search confessional poetry for the “word or a touch/ or a bit of blood” (A, 8). As the poem makes clear, there is a “large charge” for this: the mob pays the price of unconscious self-brutalization, and the reader, in so far as he resists identification with the mob, pays the price of knowledge that the pride, isolation, and ferocious blasphemy and self-desecration of the sarcastic speaker is indeed a possible state of experience. The solitude of the speaker, then, seems more completely willed and final than it does in Baudelaire; the reader faces either the speaker’s loathing or at best the pitiless and isolated knowledge of an extreme he has not imagined before.18

In outlining what I see as the literary background of Plath’s work — by which I mean a context of widely shared assumptions about poetry and not a set of specific influences — I have been presenting her as someone who attained a more complete realization of elements that had previously been achieved in poetry. By this I do not mean to argue that Plath’s work is superior to that of all her forerunners; certainly, compared to Baudelaire’s, it is narrower, and the almost complete exclusion of empathy for anything or anyone apart from her process of self-examination and self-domination contributes to that narrowness. What I do wish to argue is that it represents a genuine renewal of and achievement within post-Romantic and symbolist literary tradition, and that exactly here is where Plath’s status as a representative of a new self-consciousness in women becomes most important to her poetry. At every point, her poetic traditionalism is vitalized by the fact that she is writing as a contemporary woman; and in her doing so, postures which sometimes had remained merely theatrical or fictionalized poses became realized with the power and matter-of-factness of a sustained, personally experienced crisis. I have already suggested how this is the case with her absorption of an explicitly dehumanized rationality and scientific objectivity: she takes into herself the hitherto male agony of rationality and self-consciousness without the possibility of there being, somewhere, a womb or a natural vitalism, however strident, to expunge itself in a kind of renaturalizing marriage. Moreover, her assumption of these powers divides her radically against herself as a natural being. It is impossible, I believe, to read the end of “Tulips” as a moment of attained harmony between

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consciousness and natural process: the lines “it [her heart] opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me” (A, 12) are one of the most chilling moments of sarcastic irony in her work. Similarly, the fact that Plath was a woman writing in the tradition of “absolute” poetry reappraises and renews that tradition. For a woman to be so self-conscious, unsponsive, and alienated an artificer is, in traditional terms, so extreme a fusion of opposites that no merely decorative cult of artifice and unnaturalness would seem to be possible; both the experience of the unnatural and the dehumanization of the artificer must take on a full weight of moral and experiential horror. Alongside Plath’s self-presentations, Yeats’s antithetical descriptions of women seem more than just decades out of date. The intelligent woman who set about attaining the authority of such alienation would draw upon her unique experience of having lived at the center of, and seen through, bourgeois social and cultural illusions, her experience of extreme isolation within society, and her experience of the uncommon psychological violence she faced whenever she deviated from her assigned roles. I believe Plath achieved this authority in her best work, and that her readers are now vividly aware of it: they see her as someone whose intelligence was so complete and self-annihilating as to give them a new and terrifying vision of the extremes of consciousness and fate.

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NOTES


2 In a letter to her brother Warren, Plath concludes her excited description of the multitude of her activities in New York with the following statement: “oh, God, it is unbelievable to think of all this at once — my mind will split open.” Letters Home (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 120. Further references to this book will be abbreviated LH.

3 Being self-reliant is, of course, close kin to but qualitatively different from being self-made. The idea of the self-made man can be seen as a grotesque simplification or a sinister caricature of Emerson’s ideal.

4 At times, Plath spoke in her letters of life as a continuous struggle, a succession of successes and disappointments; the letters’ dominant tone, however, is enthusiasm, interspersed with moments of despair, that has no such perspective on itself. Instances of it can be found on almost any page of the Letters.

5 A letter written after her separation from Ted Hughes must be cited here:

I am even enjoying my rather frustrating (culturally and humanly) exile now. I am doing a poem a morning, great
things, and as soon as the nurse settles, shall try to draft this
terrific second . . . novel that I’m dying to do. Don’t talk to
me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What the person
out of Belsen — physical or psychological — wants is nobody
saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge
that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just
what it has been like. It is much more help for me, for
example, to know that people are divorced and go through
hell, than to hear about happy marriages. Let the Ladies’
Home Journal blither about those. (LH, 473)

6 The latter comment is, of course, stated with light self-irony. The same feeling
in a more desperate time could be torment.

references to this book will be abbreviated A.

8 My formulation of these two extremes is clearly indebted to George Stade’s
fine introduction to Nancy Hunter Steiner’s A Closer Look at Ariel (New
York: Popular Library, 1973), pp. 11-17; there, Stade draws on the poem “In
Plaster” for a dichotomy between “the plaster saint” or “the outer shell of
consciousness” and the “old yellow,” the “chthonic presence within.” I
would alter the emphasis somewhat, in seeing these not only in terms of a
given psychological duality, but also as two extreme resorts for her
dehumanizing form-consciousness, two extreme kinds of attainment. The term
“old yellow” in particular needs expansion: in “In Plaster,” it is still
something buried, making the thought of liberation — or, as Stade puts it,
rushing “past the boundaries of selfhood” (p. 41) — seem still a creative
possibility; in Ariel,” it is in the suicidal process of that liberation, borne on
the power of Ariel, her horse and the spirit of poetry, a power still not subject
to her will and thus causing the possibility of suicide to seem a genuine ecstasy;
in “Lady Lazarus” and “Stings,” it has achieved its maturity, its full,
willed, dehumanized self-control and solipsistic kinetic stasis, and, thus, in its
completed attainment, is as much a perfection of self-entrapment as it is one
of revolt and liberation.

9 Annette Lavers’ compressed formulation in “The World as Icon,” in The Art
of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: University of Indiana
Press, 1973), is relevant here: “This ‘reification’ which alienates the living self
(and is a frequent theme in Existentialist literature) fits into the neo-platonic
schema . . . whereby degeneration into matter is the sign of an irreversible
degeneration” (p. 127).

10 Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the concentration camps in The Origins of
portrays them as the product of a dehumanized rationality. One only needs to
accept the Nazis’ premises; the rest is logic.

11 Michael Hamburger quotes Gottfried Benn in The Truth of Poetry (New York:
and symbolist tradition owes a general debt to Hamburger’s book despite his
sceptical critique of the ideal of a dehumanized literary form in symbolist
literature.

12 Cited in The Truth of Poetry, p. 16.

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T. E. Hulme, as quoted in William V. Spanos, “Modern Literary Criticism and the Spatialization of Time: An Existential Critique,” JAAC, 29 (Fall 1970), 94. Spanos’ discussion of the aesthetics of Worringer and Hulme and his comments on the modern “angelists” provide an excellent background for understanding Plath’s assumptions about poetic form.

I am referring to Poe’s theory and practice of poetry, not prose.

See Hamburger’s commentaries on Baudelaire in The Truth of Poetry.

Another way in which Plath aggressively and chillingly alienates the reader is to use a tone of voice that can only be called sneering. “The Applicant” is written completely in this voice; the end of “Getting There,” where the speaker of the poem pictures herself stepping “to you from the black car of Lethe, / Pure as a baby,” contains a sneer directed inwards — the sarcasm of “pure as a baby,” and perhaps horror at the possibility of a solipsism so complete that one could have gone through the surreal dream experience in the poem while remaining untouched — and outwards — a snide implication that “you,” the reader, naive and unknowing, would also, if he so encountered this woman, suppose her healthy, “normal.”