

SYLVIA PLATH'S THE BELL JAR
AND THE PROBLEM OF CRITICAL RESPONSE

by

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ABSTRACT

Since its first American publication, Sylvia Plath's novel The Bell Jar has spoken to partisan and interested readers. The major criticism and reviews of the novel demonstrate the ways in which preconceived assumptions about autobiographical facts, about cultural milieu, about ironic voice, inform, and perhaps to a great extent determine, responses to the novel and to character. The ways in which these assumptions work themselves out in readings parallels the ways in which Plath's own narrative controls limit, define, and control the life and responses of Esther, her protagonist, in and against the novel. Against the prevailing ironic dissociation of affect which permeates both the novel and our responses, the imaginative embodiment of the senses not only permits, but demands, an empathetic entry into the novel which explodes both Plath's aesthetic programs and our own myths, since an engagement with the life of the novel is so embodied in affective experience that the very identification and clarification of critical concerns requires intense personal commitments.

I.

D. H. Lawrence, in his essay on "The Novel" pointed out that in life generally, and particularly and especially as readers of the novel, "we have to choose between the quick and the dead"; further, he shows that the difference between both the pairs -- life and the novel, the quick and the dead -- is no didactic absolute, but is a difficult question of relatedness: "What makes the difference? Quién sabe! But difference there is. And I know it."¹ At the outset, I want to say here that Esther, in Sylvia Plath's novel The Bell Jar, has always been "quick" for me, in ways that I cannot quite account for, since she herself complains of feeling and acting dead throughout the novel, since I balk emotionally and intellectually at almost everything she says and does, and since I respond generally to that novel as if it were the down payment on a deathly installment plan. Why this response to "quickness" should be so, like Lawrence I do not know, I only know I know it, and the rest of this essay is simply an attempt to work out and articulate what I "know" in the inter-relations between that "quickness" and the prevailing deadness.

The problems which I realize I have become aware of in trying to "work through" the contexts of response to Plath's novel are not introduced here as specific problems to be solved, but rather are introduced as representative problems that demonstrate where responses to that novel have become entangled in knots of assumptions, have become self-serving and reified. My motives, purposes, and intentions in writing are several. I

wanted to try to articulate my own tangled and ambivalent responses to Plath's novel and, inasmuch as I try to make clear that these responses are to the novel in the context of the reviews and criticism, this writing is to some limited and qualified extent a survey of the general tenor of those major reviews and criticism as readings of the novel. "Limited" and very much "qualified" because my selection of those reviews and critical articles which I think are demonstrably representative of the way in which readers have tended to respond to Plath's novel is highly personal. Frankly, most of the early reviews of Plath's novel seem to me to be inane and facile;² I have chosen not to dwell on these, but do not want to simply write them off in dismissal as responses to the novel. Instead, I have chosen to address at length my problems with the readings of several later critics — Stan Smith, Marjorie Perloff, Teresa de Lauretis, in particular — who have written what seem to me to be intelligent and articulate discussions of The Bell Jar. If I sometimes seem unnecessarily harsh towards these readers, this does not negate the acknowledgement of my deep debt in following these readers into the novel. I have learned something of the tenor of my own responses from each of them; their readings reflect to a great extent my own readings because I see in them my own impulse towards easy readings of the novel demonstrated as a counterfeit response. The readings of these critics are I think accurate and articulate entries into Plath's novel, and they all point in their different ways and from their differing perspectives to something that seems to me to be at the very heart of The Bell Jar — something that is very difficult to articulate, something that I will try to show the very premises of these readings will not allow them to "get at." The response, I will argue, is counterfeit not because the criticism is

inferior or cowardly or culpable, but because it is a response that Plath's novel itself elicits in order to maintain its own impulse towards one-dimensionality. It is much easier to demonstrate the counterfeit than it is to demonstrate the genuine novel, even if one can make a viable distinction.³ How and where such a distinction could be made, if anywhere, I will argue is for The Bell Jar at this inarticulate heart of the novel, in the silence that can hardly be spoken, in the negative space enclosed by the dense web Plath's novel constructs — all metaphors for what I will otherwise call Esther's novel.

"Literary criticism," Lawrence wrote in another essay, "can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing. Criticism . . . is . . . personal, and . . . concerned with values The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else."⁴ Lawrence's own critical writings on the novel are hardly "reasoned account/s," however brilliant they may be; he is however, demonstrably correct that the touchstone of criticism which enters into the novel is emotion, and concerned with values and beliefs. These range from the strict ideological responses of a feeling dogmatist to fictionalized or mythicized versions of his or her own dogma, to what John Dewey in his essay on "Context and Thought" rather gently calls "beliefs": "We cannot explain why we believe the things which we most firmly hold to because these things are a part of ourselves. We can no more escape them when we try to examine into them than we can get outside our physical skins so as to view them from without."⁵ It is not, I think, our physical skins we want to get outside of, but this writing, despite Dewey's comparison, ultimately does attempt to

turn the glassy surface skin of The Bell Jar inside-out to reveal Esther's novel as a discovering act of self-definition that gives voice to the silence "inside" as an enriching third dimension. Since I know authenticity to be a question of experiential quality rather than a glibly rationalized aesthetic coherence, the questionings and the attempt sometimes go into the empty spaces of Plath's text to find what the one-dimensional text did not and could not say. "Beliefs," Dewey goes on to point out, "have their own context of origin, function, and determining interests or attitudes. But they are likely to be potent in the very degree in which these contexts are passed over in silence. . . . It is dangerous to reflect seriously upon the nature, origin, and consequences of beliefs. The latter are safest when they are taken for granted without reasoned examination. To give reasons, even justifying ones, is to start a train of thoughts -- that is of questionings" (Dewey, 106-107). What follows will not, therefore, be limited to technical analysis, since it is for me very much a matter of the questioning of the emotional relatedness the novel involves with my own life, and not the technique of the connections. I can, I think, demonstrate in readings of the novel Dewey's insight that "analysis falsifies when its results are interpreted apart from any context" (Dewey, 92); how the connections are made through the techniques is a matter of the experiences which the fiction induces, and the tone and vocabulary of analysis is from subjective reference. My claim for The Bell Jar is that it forms three-dimensional experience with sufficient scope and depth to permit entry into "the nature, origin, and consequences of beliefs," but that it can do this only if it has readers, to quote Lawrence on the novel once more, "able to feel the impact of a work of art in all its complexity and force."

And a man who is emotionally educated is as rare as a phoenix More than this, even an artistically and emotionally educated man must have the courage to admit what he feels, as well as the flexibility to know what he feels.⁶

As Lawrence quite clearly saw, his challenge to us points towards our emotional illiteracy; if we can never wholly meet his impossibly idealized demands, the tautology for us is that a counterfeit response can never be open to new and disturbing perceptions of the nature of relatedness that undermines our most cherished models and beliefs. Genuine response, and this term will be my relative honorific for "sincere and vital emotion," will pertain only if we can make those connections with the novel and with the readings that cut through academic and formal posturing, and this will be difficult since a genuine response to the literature will, as Lawrence knew, always "hurt," and we therefore build emotional and literate defences to block both the pain and the recognition of the demands the literature makes on us. I am aware, too, that one of my own stylistic concerns in this writing is to temper my emotional life with a dissimulated objectivity so my outrage and personal crises are not too embarrassing and uncomfortable for my supposed and projected readers. If I am reticent in making consistent specific acknowledgement to deeper personal emotional life, this should not be too readily converted into its denial. For my own part, I know that my belligerency in pursuit of honesty, frankness, directness, in a claim for emotional vulnerability as a value, rather than character armouring, too often reveals my own complacency, smugness, and self-righteousness.

Given the recognition of this personal response to the novel, it is abundantly clear to me from the tone, and often from the stated position of most of the comments on and criticism of The Bell Jar, that virtually no one else either writes from an open attitude toward the context of feeling and

choice from which that novel's images emerge. From what are fundamentally reflections on my own emotional responses to Esther, to Plath's novel, to the reviews and criticism, I believe that I can show that this failure of sensibility is both in the novel and relevant to criticism of the novel inasmuch as these responses are intelligible when they are seen in context as serving specific functions within the structures of experience in which they occur. All I really have on my own behalf is a sense of what is wrong -- with character, with Plath, with the critics, with myself -- and the novel both provokes and allows a sense of proceeding from that feeling to the possibility of its negation. The "selective interest" of this paper, as John Dewey calls that aspect of context which "determines the selection of this rather than that subject matter" (Dewey, 101), concentrates on the pressure points where the novel and the readings hurt me most. These pressure points are the turning points for a creative negativity that seeks to make a reasoned demonstration that Esther's novel is Plath's novel turned inside-out, but I am aware too that the demonstration is a case of special pleading, since in a very real sense, Esther's life is my life -- and by extension, our lives.

II

Sylvia Plath's first, and only published, novel The Bell Jar occupies an uneasy position within a corpus already tenuously stretched by the critics between those few poems that are widely regarded as her major works and a much greater quantity of other works variously divided and graded into juvenilia, apprentice work, early work, minor work, transitional work. Part of the uneasiness is that readers of the poetry are referred across the gradations to the novel as a kind of Ur-text, central and primary both as a source of biographical material and an explanation underlying interpretation of a poet whose own biography is so much the subject of her work; but if we are to come to terms with the life in order to understand the work, this extends to The Bell Jar too. It is a vicious circle; not, as the publisher of her collected stories and prose writings has put it, that "directly or indirectly, all her prose writings turn out to be fragments of autobiography,"⁷ but that it is the "directly or indirectly" that is put into question: even Plath's published letters home to her mother seem to many readers to be a duplicitous mastery of fictions of the self -- "one might call Letters Home an epistolary novel" Hugh Kenner has claimed.⁸ Both Lois Ames and Alfred Alvarez report that Plath herself characterized the novel "as an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past"⁹ and though the "autobiographical" in her remark begs the question of the use of her own experience as her subject, her disclaimer that the novel is an apprentice

work has to be a judgement based on Plath's own evaluation of her later inventive or imaginative powers and the social assumptions regarding the relationship between the relative worth of the novel or biography. Plath's concerns with both classification and evaluation remain problems for her readers; the current academic debate about Plath's poetry is basically whether the biography is "mythologized" or "confessional," and which is somehow to be regarded as better or more worthwhile:¹⁰ that same debate, or a debate in parallel terms, I will argue in this essay, takes place, for Plath and for us, within the contexts The Bell Jar both evokes and provokes.

The novel was first published in London in January 1963 under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas and created only minor interest in a half-dozen condescending reviews.¹¹ On February 11 Plath committed suicide, and when Alvarez printed her "last poems" as "A Poet's Epitaph" in The Observer of February 17¹² the association of Plath's imaginative art with her real death was forever established. The posthumous publication of Ariel in 1965 had a tremendous impact with echoes far beyond the literary world and prompted the reissue of the novel under her own name in 1966, when it was widely read in Britain and, in imported copies, in the United States. Over protests from the Plath family the first American edition was issued in 1971, when the facts of Plath's well-publicized death and biography were well known. The American edition included a lengthy biographical note-cum-interpretation ("the central themes of Sylvia Plath's early life are the basis for The Bell Jar") by Lois Ames,¹³ already appointed by the Estate as Plath's biographer, and the dust cover features a photograph identified as "Sylvia Plath as she appeared in the August 1953 issue of Mademoiselle." The photo shows Plath smiling, seated on a loveseat, holding

a paper rose, and above the photo is printed an excerpt from The Bell Jar

"Come on, give us a smile."

I sat on the pink velvet loveseat in Jay Cee's Office, holding a paper rose and facing the magazine photographer I didn't want my picture taken because I was going to cry. I didn't know why I was going to cry, but I knew that if anybody spoke to me or looked at me too closely the tears would fly out of my eyes and the sobs would fly out of my throat and I'd cry for a week

"Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem."

In spite of critical condenscension to "amateur . . . plagiarisms from one's autobiography,"¹⁴ it seems to me that everyone who reviewed that edition of The Bell Jar "welcomes any collision with [the] warming facts"¹⁵ of Plath's life. As much as a novel can be, it was recorded rather than imagined," Saul Maloff wrote,¹⁶ and although his statement begs the question about how we read novels, it does typify the normative critical response to The Bell Jar. Almost all readings extrapolate from assumptions about the context of time and place and first-person narrative a standard reading of the novel as a "cheerful, shallow, fast-moving and satirical account of the author's barely fictionalized summer in New York."¹⁷ Attention is forcibly turned from the novel to a mode of comparison: novel to biography, resulting in a pragmatic positivistic exploration of biographical "reality" that tends to preclude understanding of aesthetic experience. Plath's dramatic life, culminating in her tragic suicide, seems to become the whole point of critical attention and certainly provides a standard of judgement for many critics; Plath's real breakdown and actual suicide are designated apparent acts which validate her novel and later poetry, and give them their interest and prove her seriousness. This attitude is quite explicit in much of the criticism of

the novel, and is used there to justify the novel's "weaknesses" as undigested autobiography.¹⁸ The novel is inferred from the "facts" of the biography; apparently some critics feel that the dramatics of Plath's biography provide just the sort of competitive "experience" that Esther Greenwood burlesques in what she feels she needs to write her own novel:

How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for a short story about her adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of thing? (135)

Esther's heroine of course, is to be herself, 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." (134)

There are six letters in Sylvia too, though Plath's own comments on the relationship between art and personal experience seem clear enough, in its opposition to Esther's self-absorption:

I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying — like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience — and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant¹⁹

In this paper I want to examine responses to the programmatic control and manipulation of experience that other critics and I find in our readings of The Bell Jar, and to do this in relation to the compulsive freedom Plath claimed for herself as a result of writing a novel. In terms of the

general relevance which Plath claimed as a goal for her work — "to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on"²⁰ -- it is, I feel, abundantly clear from her novel at least, that Plath's own loud editorial voice strives to give political gesture and attitude to her own imagination, and that the megaphones of her "relevance" are precisely the loudest and most demanding when they drown out the protesting voice and obliterate the protesting impulses of personal experience in and against the kinds of historical practice and social reality Plath invokes. Inasmuch as we are all victims of the twentieth century, our recognition of, and response to, both the impulse towards the reification of character as commodity, and the negation of that impulse, can hardly be neutral: I do not except myself; this is to recognize that every one of us is biased; every critic and every reader, like every artist, has a bias, a predilection, a personalized response that is bound up with the very existence of our notions of individuality. Aesthetic experience is not an objective fact, but a subjective reality. The depictions of that experience are not descriptions of sensations, but metaphorical explanations of the effect of the work on us.

I am taking the position that it is idealistic and mistaken to view the language of criticism as value-free and neutral. Every time we say something important about a novel, we do something to that novel and to our own experiences of that novel, and what we do to that novel is based on our own biases about human nature and aesthetic response and literature; biases that are reflected in what we think is important and what is not. In accordance with widely shared needs for critical defenses to protect against any possible connecting of the felt response to literature with the rest of

life and emotion, most of us at one time or another are sensitive to our biases and wish to deny them. Having said this, I should at the outset try to state my own bias as clearly and fundamentally as I can: human life is worth living, and if it does not always seem so, it could be, and moreover, ought to be, made worth living. I do not claim this as any kind of civic virtue, but make the assertion in the face of Plath's suicide, its model for several of my friends as a way of death, and the "authority" and "validity" her tragic death is taken to give her works.

It is frightening to me to read A. Alvarez's comment on Plath: "individual suffering can be heroic provided it leaves the person who suffers a sense of his own individuality."²¹ If parts of this paper seem defensive, that is perhaps because the cultural assumptions implicit in Alvarez's comment and all that it entails both directly and indirectly attack my motives in wanting to write and in trying to write this paper. Now, I know that the way I write has to do with the way I feel, and I also know that I sometimes feel most aggressively alive when I am angry about Plath and her critics. "Nothing is 'real' which does not sustain itself in existence, in a life-and-death struggle with the situations and conditions of its existence" Herbert Marcuse has written in trying to define the development of a "subjectivity,"²² and my response to Plath is a struggle within and with an historically evolving set of circumstances. Value, as Marcuse suggests, lies not in the bias, but in the struggle, and I don't know that my bias will be validated and supported by articulating my responses to Plath's works, -- certainly not by Alvarez's presuppositions. This is to admit that I am unsettled and disturbed, not only by much of Plath's work, but even more so by some of the critical reaction to it,

which seems often to me to be humanly deficient, or even deadly. In part because of this, I think that any reader who prefers the immediacy of his or her own private experiences and his or her own choices is forced to survive with the problems raised by Plath's works, rather than submit to mediated versions of them, for each of us has the capacity to discriminate, and not only affirm value or appreciate meaning. I accept that criticism is experiment and paraphrase but am conscious that some readings seem more responsive to me than others. Behind the response there is, I take it, a quality, depth, and intensity which is an impulse to a unique and experimental life and an art of living which we try against the life around us.

The recognition that we do try the aesthetic meanings we derive from the art against the world, I assume is behind the demands that Plath's art provide "illumination . . . of the general human condition," provide "general principles, sure origins, applications, or lessons" made by Irving Howe and Elizabeth Hardwick respectively.²³ David Holbrook's concern that "few critics have raised the question of the moral effects of Sylvia Plath's works"²⁴ has motivated his own lengthy analyses of Plath's "solutions" to the problems of "meaning" and "being." In the end, he finds these to be nihilistic, solipsistic, insidiously false solutions which threaten the quality of our very lives: "we must defend ourselves against her falsifications, especially when they are the object of cults, in an atmosphere in which we are being urged to cultivate our psychoses and endorse decadence and moral inversion" (Holbrook,5). The curiously outraged moral tone demonstrates that Holbrook is really preaching conversion to an idealized moral theory -- "It is natural to man to be good and to strive towards transcendence" -- that he finds to affirm "consciousness and

civilized values" (Holbrook, 283). This problem of persuasive didacticism, pro and con, begins to be addressed by Irving Howe in his dissenting opinion on Plath, as an adjunct to what he calls "the hardest critical question":

Given the fact that in a few poems Sylvia Plath illustrates an extreme state of existence, one at the very boundary of nonexistence, what illumination — moral, psychological, social — can be provided of either this state or the general human condition by a writer so deeply rooted in the extremity of her plight? Suicide is an eternal possibility of our life and therefore always interesting; but what is the relation between a sensibility so deeply captive to the idea of suicide and the claims and possibilities of human existence in general? Perhaps it is assumed that to enter the state of mind in which she found herself at the end of her life is its own ground for high valuation; but what will her admirers say to those who reply that precisely this assumption is what needs to be questioned? (Howe, 235)

If Holbrook finds in his articulate response that his own faith and ideals are not validated and supported by Plath's works, he appreciates in reaction the deep and attractive quality of the threat to his ideals he finds there. Elizabeth Hardwick on the other hand, denigrates Howe's question and the assumption he poses as contentious, from the outset, in her attribution of pathology to the life and the work:

In Sylvia Plath's work and in her life the elements of pathology are so deeply rooted and so little resisted that one is disinclined to hope for general principles, sure origins, applications, or lessons. Her fate and her themes are hardly separate and both are singularly terrible. Her work is brutal, like the smash of a fist and sometimes it is also mean in its feelings. (Hardwick, 3)

The disagreements among the converted, one way or another, are probably traceable to the difference in their assumptions, as Howe suggests, but for those of us who are touched and troubled by the works, Holbrook locates the pathology, the brutality, the meanness more accurately, I think, in identifying the locus of the problem:

the poems and The Bell Jar present us with a number of perplexing difficulties, too — of how to respond. While we can easily share the author's horror at the dehumanization of the American scene, our problem is that we cannot share her solutions. Her protagonist's enthusiasm for suicide, and the way in which this enthusiasm is glamorized, are a desperate and inverted 'remedy'. Nor can we share what goes with these — the protective sangfroid of her prose whose flippancy belongs itself to the dehumanization (and is akin to the terrible 'objective' language of 'body-count' and 'overkill') (Holbrook, 11)

Culture, style, bias, emotional life, our need for defences are all implicated. Holbrook's programmatic moralism would prescribe a normative response — "the failure of tone is a manifestation of a certain emotional failure to know how to respond, of what the psychotherapists call a 'diminution of affect', or 'absence of appropriate feeling tone'" (Holbrook, 290) -- in which by their failure both Esther and Plath are implicated, but I think it is more important to us to realize how we do respond.

For me there are two horrible touchstones. In his poignant reconstruction of what he thinks Plath's last days must have been like, Alvarez interprets her poem "Edge," which he considers "one of her most beautiful poems" to be "specifically about the act she was about to perform." Given that interpretation, he goes on to say:

It is a poem of great peace and resignation, utterly without self-pity. Even with a subject so appallingly

close she remains an artist, absorbed in the practical task of letting each image develop a full, still life of its own. That she is writing about her own death is almost irrelevant.²⁵

This is perhaps not the place to quarrel with the several assumptions upon which Alvarez constructs his interpretation of this poem, but even given his own interpretation, how could Plath's real or imagined death be irrelevant, -- and irrelevant to whom? Irrelevant to the poem? And why? Alvarez after all viewed both the poem and the corpse; for him it is the image that has life: the poem "Words" he says "is about the way language remains and echoes long after the turmoil of life has passed." In respect to the "turmoil of life" Andrew Brink remarks that Plath attempted to overcome anxiety "by means of conventional redemptive symbols which are imagistically potent without being effective"²⁶ but it seems to me that Plath's art precisely challenges these forms of ritualistic emotional life that can become worn-out, can become cliché. This reflects my own bias of course -- that life is not in words -- for the directions of what might be an instinctive preference that informs my own perceptions, my own feelings of worth and sincerity, my consciousness of insight into my own personal epistemology, and it leads me directly to confront that other related touchstone provided by Charles Newman, the editor and contributor to The Art of Sylvia Plath, in his "Introduction" to that book:

Given the premises of her poetry, what good is art? That question cannot be answered in criticism, but it might be worth pointing out that like much of contemporary art, the real terror of her poetry derives from the fact that it actually bypasses life to question the function and value of art itself.²⁷

This seems to me to be several evasions -- of intention, of the

possibilities of judgement and evaluation, of our apparent need to clarify and attempt to make sense of response, of why we interpret at all, why we need literature — but exactly identifies the issue: what is the function and value of art which is understood to bypass life?

Against the aesthetic idealization of art apart from life, stand deep subjective identifications with the novel, with Esther, with Plath herself. "Reading The Bell Jar, I became aware of how much of myself there was in it that I never encountered in novels before" Teresa de Lauretis writes, and the "self" that is encountered is embodied in a life in the culture — "and I realized how forcefully our view of the world and of ourselves is shaped by the works of literature we read."²⁸ "Written mostly by men" de Lauretis appends to her remark, and similar feelings are attested to by the self-confessed male chauvinist Michel Richard:

I read The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath. What a revelation; it opened my eyes and it turned my head around. Her words brought comfort and shame because the story of Esther Greenwood made me feel guilt but also made me see the cause of it all — all the stupid myths that I had believed and the crippling effect that they had in my relationships with women. The insensitive, superior attitude that was mine so closely paralleled those that brought about the destruction of Esther Greenwood and, more importantly, of Sylvia Plath. And the woman destroyed — this Sylvia Plath — was the very writer who has opened up a whole new perspective on life.²⁹

De Lauretis' awareness and realization, Richard's confessed "guilt," "comfort and shame," the "revelation" to him of a "whole new perspective," to a certain extent find expression in a new self-satisfaction, an attitude, a position to be adopted, a disposition to be cultivated, an apparent claim

that one is somehow a better person for our individual emancipation. Our feeling of insight is its own justification; and the justification transforms actual imaginative experience into individually and socially acceptable clichés. Thus, for instance Marjorie Perloff:

It is beautifully ironic that Sylvia Plath, who never heard of Women's Liberation and would be unlikely to join The Movement were she alive today, has written one of the most acute analyses of the feminist problem that we have in contemporary fiction. What makes The Bell Jar so moving -- and often so marvelously funny -- is that the heroine is just as innocent as she is frightening perceptive.³⁰

Perloff's curious assertion that Plath could not be a feminist because her interests were not ideological (made also by Jon Rosenblatt),³¹ I think parallels her subjective definitions of "analyses," "problem," "innocent," and "perceptive" for instance, with their associated adjectives, that are subject-ed to a certain artificial closure stemming from cultural values, ideological values, aesthetic dicta: "If this . . . does not lead to a Brave New World of happy liberated women, we need not be disappointed. Like Chekhov, Sylvia Plath knows that the novelist's job is not to solve problems but to diagnose them correctly" (Perloff, 512).

The prevailing diagnosis that has been made of Plath's work is that it is schizoid, both as a personal and cultural condition. David Holbrook argues that "there is a schizoid condition in Plath's life and work": but this cannot be discussed without reference to the problem which the schizoid individual is singularly equipped to recognize -- the problem today of living in a schizoid society" (Holbrook, 7). Holbrook's point is that Sylvia Plath developed a logic of false solutions to this problem and

that her solutions are not to be emulated: "Sylvia Plath does not speak for all women, unless we are to suppose all women schizoid" (Holbrook, 154); but his sardonic conditional is exactly taken up by Suzanne Juhasz who argues in her essay "The Double Bind of the Woman Poet" how and why literary women may often feel schizoid, and therefore develop "various tactics to deal with and to struggle against the strain of the double bind in which they find themselves."³² Marjorie Perloff argues that Esther's "schizoid experience" "differs from that of so-called 'normal' girls in degree rather than in kind. It is simply a stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her identity" (Perloff, 509).

The text represents for many of us, then, something between the case-history of a personal pathology and a descriptive document of a culture, and the meanings we see in the book change relative to the context. To say that The Bell Jar is autobiography is to be totally explanatory of what the book is, but only begins to account for the effect of the life it contains on us. As a document of the culture, we recognize it to describe the facts as we know them, but it then has no logic, no explanation of the systems of interpretations which we place on the context. Raymond Williams in The Long Revolution puts the problem this way:

If we compare art with its society, we find a series of real relationships showing its deep and central connections with the rest of general life. . . . We find . . . in certain characteristic forms and devices, evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society: often admitted to consciousness for the first time. Part of this evidence will show a false consciousness, designed to prevent any substantial recognition; part again a deep desire, as yet uncharted, to move beyond this. . . . And at this point we find ourselves moving into a process which cannot be a simple comparison of art and society, but

which must start from the recognition that all the acts of men compose a general reality within which both art and what we ordinarily call society are comprised. We do not now compare the art with the society; we compare both with the whole complex of human actions and feelings.³³

The comparison in which we can find "evidence of the deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society" is for Williams rooted in historical context, but the comparison and the evidence may not necessarily have to be mediated by the separations of time and distance, since both the context and the mediations are only always of our own making. "I shall take certain works, like the poem Tulips, or the novel The Bell Jar, as largely autobiographical, while reminding myself that there is also a sense in which they are fictions, too" David Holbrook states at the beginning of his book (Holbrook, 5), and the "sense in which they are fictions" indicates that the typology which we place on the book is provided not by the book, but by ourselves. Our reading of the book is supported by our paradigm; conversely the paradigm is supported by our reading of the book. Clearly, the possibilities for change in the model will require various sorts of relaxation or contradiction within the system of presuppositions.

Critics of The Bell Jar, though, manifest a preference for investing imaginative fiction with background reality. The "facts" of the given reality are underlined by implying that alternative views of experience are unbelievable, suspect, and/or dishonest — or according to Phoebe Adams' review of The Bell Jar, deviations from "objective reality" are simply artistic failings: "Plath never solved the problem of providing the reader with clues to the objective reality of episodes reported through the consciousness of a deranged narrator."³⁴ "Objectively" Adams' "realism"

tells-it-like-it-is because everyone knows it must be that way; there seems to be general consensus that that-is-how-it-was. "The Bell Jar is about the way this country was in the nineteen-fifties" Robert Scholes writes,³⁵ and it seems that one's attitude towards that decade to a large extent determines the response to the novel.

The voice is straight out of the 1950's: politely disenchanted, wholesome, yes, wholesome, but never cloying, immediately attractive, nicely confused by it all, incorrigibly truth-telling; in short the kind of kid we liked best then, the best product of our best schools. The hand of Salinger lay heavy on her. (Maloff, 34)

Salinger's heavy hand here obscures any problems with content which question just such a sentimentalized acceptance of the 1950's and their styles at face value; the perceptions of the novel are established on the basis of an assumed commitment to style. Elizabeth Hardwick characterizes the novel:

This autobiographical work is written in a bare, rather collegiate 1950's style, yet the attitude, the distance and bitter carelessness are colored by a deep mood of affectlessness. The pleasures and sentiments of youth— wanting to be invited to the Yale prom, losing your virginity -- are rather unreal. (Hardwick, 4)

And Mary Ellmann goes on from Hardwick's feelings of the unreality of events; "If such events constitute reality," she writes, "madness is as plausible as sanity."³⁶ And what is a problem for Phoebe Adams finds normative expression in the corresponding view of A. R. Jones that artists "use the deranged mind as a means by which they explore that area of human experience on the fringes of consciousness to arrive at a different, perhaps more profound view of the human predicament."³⁷ More, the

tentativeness of Jones' "perhaps" is promoted by Gayle Whittier in a more recent article on The Bell Jar to a generic model, "in which the vision of an insane speaker is given full expression. . . . By one of those simple inversions that so neatly avoid ambiguities, the mad narrator usually envisions rather than hallucinates. His is customarily the 'true' vision."³⁸ Whittier's "usually," "customarily" identify the "assumption that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind" (Jones, 231).

"Objective" facts then, can be tempered by "madness," and disturbance can be put to good use; Robert Scholes suggests that "in looking at the madness of the world and the world of madness /The Bell Jar/ forces us to consider the great question posed by all truly realistic fiction: What is reality and how can it be confronted?" (Scholes, 7).

But is the "madness" here inferred from the novel? Or is this concept a sociological construct of background "reality" anxiously infused into the novel as a standard of judgement and validation displacing the very disturbances of this assumed reality into the limbo of social objectivity? What is the relationship between Esther's perceptions and our experience? As Scholes himself points out, there is a pervading uneasiness among readers about where in the novel Esther becomes "mad." As it is, Scholes wields generic "realism" as if it were as solid as a club, with which all the subtleties and ambiguities of imaginative experience and individual doubt could be beaten into submission. "Truly realistic fiction" is an honorific; the attribution of "reality" is conditional upon "the connotation of an agreeable emotional state" (Dewey, 95) in the critic necessary to maintain and perpetuate the limits of an individual's power to assimilate

or express feelings which have explosive possibilities. In inducing experiences of "a new perspective which leads to new surveys of possibilities" (Dewey, 107), and that might be realized, the immanent discovering presence of imaginative experience has precisely the unsettling ability to irritate context in breaking through our own and outside prescriptions, and to call progressively the deepest accepted values into question: such as the need to define "reality," as Scholes suggests. But even if "the immanent discovering presence" is a mystical nominalization of another "reality," still imaginative awareness in aesthetic experience is a struggle with the defences of intellectual and emotional barriers to literate and sensitized readings. The Bell Jar is judged for authenticity to a comforting post - Salinger "realism" that presents a world in terms of nostalgic clichés that are too easily accepted. "Literate and sensitized" are of course my own honorifics; just how easily we undermine these ideals in accepting easy clichés becomes evident in Mary Ellmann's reading of the novel:

The novel exposes Sylvia Plath's first milieu, the poverty of suggestion by which her talent was nonetheless aroused. The American Girl is the topic. Her growing up suburban, with saddle shoes and 'fifteen years of straight A's', her eastern women's college, her scholarships and weekends at Yale the ideal coming-of-age in America. And then the breakdown — the only implement required to separate 'Esther Greenwood' from her banality, to pull her like a letter from hell out of her innocuous envelope. (Ellmann, 222)

Ellmann's "saddle shoes" give her reading away as a feeling response she has towards what she calls the "cheap smart lie" of the ideal, "The American Girl," for although The Bell Jar is full of footwear — "tooled

leather cowboy boots," "orange suede elevator shoes," rain boots, tennis shoes and ski boots, "sensible flat brown shoes," "black patent leather shoes," "blue stiletto heels," "flat brown leather shoes," "white sneakers," "soft rubber soles," "high-heeled black overshoes with Persian lamb cuffs," -- there are nowhere any saddle shoes "in" the novel. Whatever one's sympathy with the cultural significance of Ellmann's outraged nostalgia, as critique it serves to reify the same self-serving attitudes that Esther expresses:

She reminded me of a Girl Scout leader I'd had once. I glanced at her feet, and sure enough, she wore those flat brown shoes with fringed tongues lapping down over the front that are supposed to be so sporty, and the ends of the laces were knobbed with little imitation acorns. (212)

The question of voice is not only stylistic, since Esther's sense of déjà vu in her "sure enough" shifts tense to a contemporary "are supposed to be" in a sympathetic appeal to implicitly shared values and assumptions. I think there is an understanding that Plath assumes the appeal will elicit certain responses to persons, to Girl Scouts, to a particular style of shoe, in exactly the same way that Ellmann's use of "The American Girl" and her saddle shoes does. Is there a necessary reciprocation between our attitude towards the Girl Scouts and our attitude towards the shoe? J. D. O'Hara's review of The Bell Jar, "An American Dream Girl," buttresses Ellmann's iconography with remarks about Plath herself:

She was tall, blonde, beautiful, intelligent, witty, and talented -- everyone's dream girl, the American ideal. But we've begun to learn nowadays, that the safest thing to do in the presence of an Eagle Scout is to turn and run, screaming; and we have also begun to

realize that to be a beautiful, intelligent, witty, and talented girl, at least here in mid-century America, is considerably more dangerous than shooting heroin. (O'Hara, 3)

Does the novel invite such iconography? And what does this mean in terms of our response to the novel? Is the "banality" Ellmann finds in the "milieu" negated or confirmed by this, or even illuminated as banality? Or do we find ourselves in a closed world of preconceptions, of received truths, adopted not because they are reasoned to be apt and legitimate, but because they produce the right impressions?

What "we've begun to learn nowadays" I take it, is that Eagle Scouts have potential capacities for feeling and anger. And "sure enough," Valerie, the girl Esther associates with the Girl Scouts, reports that she was before "always angry" (217). But now, since her lobotomy, she is "not angry any more," in fact she smiles, is friendly, pleasant, cheerful, reads "her tatty copy of Vogue with intense interest" (213). Or are we to understand these as sure indications of an attitude we are expected to take, an eliciting of standardized responses? We pity her "calm, snowmaiden face behind which so little, bad or good, could happen" (271). Valerie has been rendered harmless, but it is unclear who is protected by this operation: Valerie herself protected from her consuming fury, the milieu conveniently protected from her rage, or the novel itself, which could scarcely contain her anger, since Valerie is as rigidly circumscribed by the standardized assumption "we've begun to learn" as is *The American Girl* by "her innocuous envelope."

III.

What possibilities does the novel present to unlearn these kinds of assumptions? Although Ellmann apparently somehow senses that the novel uses clichés to expose the clichéd quality of experience, when 'Esther Greenwood' is enclosed in Ellmann's own quotation marks, becomes via those marks "The American Girl" circa 1953, it is difficult to see how her own reading of the novel "exposes" anything not already culturally apparent.

Esther is strolling on Boston Common with a sailor who has picked her up. His arm is around her waist, stroking her hip and she is self-consciously "trying not to say anything that would show I was from Boston and might at any moment meet Mrs. Willard, or one of my mother's other friends." (148) The sailor squeezes her hip, suggests an intensification in their relationship, suggests they go under the monument where he can kiss her:

At that moment I noticed a brown figure in sensible brown shoes striding across the common in my direction. From the distance, I couldn't make out any features on the dime-sized face, but I knew it was Mrs. Willard. (150)

Now, the "sensible" here, for Esther, belongs to and defines Mrs. Willard as surely as do that woman's maxims on marriage and emotional ties and the use she makes of her braided wool rug for a kitchen mat; it simply makes what is obvious and disapproved to Esther and to Ellmann seem more obvious and disapproved. Given Esther's expressed feelings about Mrs.

Willard's character and values and the context of Esther's self-conscious dread of exposure in her experimental identity as Elly Higginbottom, from Chicago, it is perfectly appropriate that Esther immediately knows the brown figure to be Mrs. Willard, whom she most dreads to meet. This is the perfect logic of paranoia, hinging on that "but" of Esther's which links her unnecessary perceptions to knowledge. Does it make any difference to the reader, however, that the "sensible flat brown shoes" are more easily discerned across the distance than the "features on the dime-sized face"? Although we would not be able to recognize Mrs. Willard in any case, since she always remains quite faceless, Esther can summon her forth at the precise instant she is required to disrupt the escalation in the sailor's intentions: [Esther is experimenting with a new sexual identity with the sailor, but is self-consciously aware of her own sexual reservations, aware that she is not as free and easy as she pretends to be, and afraid that she will say anything that will show the sailor, and herself too, that she is, as she fears, a prude "from Boston."] "Take your hands off me," from between clenched teeth, is what Esther proves to say in the clinch; rather than this, as I think we would expect, giving her show away, it seems to have only desired effects: the sailor falters, baffled. "Of course it wasn't Mrs. Willard" Esther tells us, and that "of course" snaps shut the self-closing loop of logic. It cannot be Mrs. Willard; any confrontation is unthinkable, not only here for Esther, but perhaps for the intentions of the novel as well, since the mere possibility of disruptive confrontation is sentimentalized by Ellmann's alignment with Esther's perceptions into a facile nostalgia for proleptic values of judgement that recede back into the past. Esther's uneasiness with two sets of sexual standards of

behaviour, the 'loose' and the 'prudish,' her fear of exposure in this uneasiness, her avoidance of both anger and rejection, and the displacement of her guilt and fear into the need to blame someone, as well as our attitudes towards and judgements about all this, and the possibilities of potential insight into conflict and disturbance as sources of perception and meaning, are all absorbed into those "sensible flat brown shoes" and all the easy responses they invite.

These shoes that define and absorb attitudes are, in a more blatant way, the "high, black, buttoned boots" of Miss Norris, since these boots are more than just a part of the standard costume of the spinster — mid-calf length dress fastened with a cameo broach, her "rusty hair knotted in a schoolmarmish bun, and thin, silver-rimmed spectacles attached to her breast pocket with a black elastic" — but are the focus of Esther's perceptions:

without speaking or looking at me, Miss Norris swung her feet in their high, black, buttoned boots over the other side of the bed and walked out of the room . . . Miss Norris reached the door of the dining room and paused. All the way to the dining room she had walked precisely, placing her feet in the very center of the cabbage roses that twined through the pattern of the carpet. She waited a moment and then, one by one, lifted her feet over the doorsill and into the dining room as though stepping over an invisible shin-high stile. (215)

Those invisible shin-high stiles at doorways that determine all her actions, have the same reality for Miss Norris as her boots do for us; they define not her character, since she is presented as an automaton, but her presence in the novel. And in some way we know that the novel is asking us to accept that this is what happens to virgin spinsters, doomed in an

obsessive attempt to cross those invisible barriers to a free and easy life --the bell-jar, the hymen.

If Miss Norris' boots seem to have a life of their own, have absorbed all her will and character, this brings us to recognize that The Bell Jar is a novel in which "boots echo like pistol shots," shoes point, have their own voices, go "boomp, boomp," are used as weapons, are "stilletos," perch on a log, keep a vigil. Do we have some way of discriminating between assumptions and attitudes towards all this footwear which, correctly or incorrectly, we and Esther and Plath take to be shared, and those which have a meaning and significance for nobody but Esther?

Esther has dinner and drinks with the simultaneous interpreter Constantin, decides to let him seduce her, agrees to go up to his apartment after the evening out, which as her mother has warned her, can "mean only the one thing." Constantin, however, shows no desire to seduce her "whatsoever," and Esther takes the initiative:

"I think I'll go in and lie down," I said.

I strolled casually into the bedroom and stooped over to nudge off my shoes I stretched full length and shut my eyes. Then I heard Constantin sigh and come in from the balcony. One by one his shoes clonked on the floor, and he lay down by my side. (91)

Now Esther in taking off her shoes and lying on his bed takes this to be a clear signal to Constantin that this is a context in which she is ready to be made love to. We recognize this context, since I take it we share the context drawn from our own experience, and may, depending on our own attitudes and values, even anticipate it, but we also recognize that the other shared context in which we take off our shoes and lie on the bed is

when we wish to sleep. This is what Constantin does, and their common action divides into two disjunctive contexts, since they do not make love and then sleep, nor sleep and then make love on waking. They both fall asleep and wake up indifferent, to sit "back to back on our separate sides of the bed fumbling with our shoes in the horrid cheerful white light of the bed lamp" (94). Their failure to make contact, Esther's disappointed expectations, the tentativeness of the whole scene, is underscored by that "fumbling" with their shoes, ironically and horribly illuminated by that "cheerful white light." Is this to belabour the obvious? For the scene echoes through the thematic concerns the novel sets up for me: of the presumed impossibility of sexual expression as an utterance of love or tenderness or self-articulation; the desire to sleep, the desire for an anaesthetic self, to be numb, frozen, perpetually marble calm, and the fear of this desire, too.

Constantin's "point of keeping clear of [sexual] attachments" (91) is of course prefaced in the novel by the comically woe-begone incestuous fantasies of Eric, who writes Esther that "he might really be able to love" her, she has "such a kind face, surprisingly like his older sister's" (88), and followed in New York by Esther's blind date with the sinister "woman-hater" Marco, in love with his first cousin who is going to be a nun. But the logic of incestuous fantasy which Esther so clearly believes to understand with Eric (It had crossed my mind at the time that Eric might be a good person to go to bed with. . . . But then Eric wrote me a letter saying he thought he might really be able to love me, I was so intelligent and cynical and yet had such a kind face, surprisingly like his older sister's; so I knew it was no use, I was the type he would never go to bed

with" [emphasis added]), is completely turned around by her and used against Marco:

"Does she know you love her?"

"Of course."

I paused. The obstacle seemed unreal to me.

"If you love her," I said, "you'll love somebody else someday." (121)

Esther could hardly do much more to provoke him and Marco angrily knocks her down. Although Esther defends herself fairly adroitly against Marco's rape attempt, the passage defends against much more — against Marco's tango, where Esther "seemed to be riveted to him, limb for limb, moving as he moved, without any will or knowledge of my own" (119), against her own passive submission in that dance and in the face of the attempted rape itself as a kind of horizontal escalation of that tango:

Then he threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through me and into the mud.

"It's happening," I thought. "It's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen." (121)

The whole blind date, from the image of the sailing glass, through the biting and the thrashing, and the two women's bared breasts, with Esther's will-less tango the antipode of Doreen's wild jitter-bugging, is a counterpoint of Doreen's corybantic date with Lenny Shepherd. While Doreen recognizes the circumstantial dangers of rape to helpless women — "Stick around, will you?" she asks Esther, "I wouldn't have a chance if he tried anything funny. Did you see that muscle?" (16), Marco exhibits his muscle from the moment his dry, hard hand encircles Esther's upper arm and tightens, to leave "a thumbprint purpled into view . . . and four, faint

matching prints" (118) and he successively grips her, hooks her, jerks her, leads her, knocks her down, flings her back, grinds her, weighs her to the earth. It is only when Marco calls her a slut that Esther begins to writhe and bite in defense, gouges, punches and not only defends herself from Marco's superior strength and darker purposes, but from his words, and in her simile smashes a battleship as well, subduing Marco, and clearly tempering his dangerousness with deprecation, since although he remains threatening, he is finally left "on his hands and knees, scrabbling in the darkness." (123)

If power, strength, submission, hatred, anger, and how they are implicated in sexual purpose are the issues that accrue to Marco and attitudes towards rape, Constantin is his defused obverse, and there remains the problem of his vision of love and tenderness and the failure to make substantial contact:

As I stared down at Constantin . . . his eyelids lifted and he looked through me, and his eyes were full of love. I watched dumbly as a shutter of recognition clicked across the blur of tenderness and the wide pupils went glossy and depthless as patent leather.
(94)

The tenderness and care Esther cannot fix in Constantin's patent leather eyes, she bequeaths in a wistful legacy to her own patent leather shoes. She contemplates suicide on the sand bar at Point Shirley:

I had removed my patent leather shoes after a while, for they foundered badly in the sand. 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.

I fingered the box of razors in my pocketbook. (170)

Realizing she has no warm bath-water to open her wrists in, she decides to simply sit on the sandbar until it is completely submerged by the tide. But dusk begins to fall as the tide comes in, Esther shivers, her bare feet get cold, and she wavers, thinks "longingly of the black shoes on the beach."

A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache.

My flesh winched, in cowardice, from such a death.

I picked up my pocketbook and started back over the cold stones to where my shoes kept their vigil in the violet light. (172)

There is a circular movement here, from the disembodied shoes that are imagined to gaze tenderly after the Esther that desires to be drowned, to be numbed, petrified like a stone, that desires to be a stone, and the circle hinges on Esther's real awareness of her cold bare feet, and turns the shoes to an image that calls Esther back to life and warmth.

Shoes define in The Bell Jar new and unsettling perspectives for Esther and the reader: "The next thing I had a view of was somebody's shoe."

It was a stout shoe of cracked black leather and quite old, with tiny air holes in a scalloped pattern over the toe and a dull polish, and it was pointed at me. It seemed to be placed on a hard green surface that was hurting my right cheekbone.

I kept very still, waiting for a clue that would give me some notion of what to do. (49)

The clues come from voices "from a cool, rational region far above my head" (50). There are two voices -- a man's voice, which Esther thinks is strange because "no men were allowed to be in our hotel at any time of the

night or day," and a woman's voice. Esther hears "a hollow boomp boomp in my right ear that grew fainter and fainter. Then a door opened in the distance, and there were voices and groans, and the door shut again," which eliminates one pair of shoes from the room. The shoe that remains, the shoe described above, belongs to the female voice; or rather, in the logic of the novel, Esther "figure[s] the voice" must belong to the black shoe." The voice and the shoe do in fact belong to the hotel nurse tending Esther as she comes to consciousness. So it is a female shoe she sees, and we do not know this from the description of the shoe, but from the explanation the novel gives.

The shoe that "has" the life of the wearer is I think shown to us most graphically when the shoes are cups, those inverted bell jars, for Esther's life-blood. When Esther drops a razor experimentally on the calf of her leg:

a bright seam of red welled up at the lip of the slash. The blood gathered darkly, like fruit, and rolled down my ankle into the cup of my black patent leather shoe.

If this shoe here contains the blood Esther wants to let in suicide, the same shoe later contains the blood Esther wants to keep, when she begins to hemorrhage after being penetrated by Irwin. Worried, Esther anxiously goes to seek help at the apartment Joan shares with Nurse Kennedy:

I wondered when Joan would notice the blood trickling down my legs and oozing, stickily, into each black patent leather shoe. (259)

When Joan "still . . . hadn't noticed anything," Esther holds the shoe up, lest she miss it, for us all to see:

I bent down, with a brief grunt, and slipped off one of my winter-cracked black Bloomingdale shoes. I held the shoe up, before Joan's enlarged, pebbly eyes, tilted it, and watched her take in the stream of blood that cascaded onto the beige rug. (260)

This last horrid icon contains not only the blood, but I think in its effect on Esther, on Joan, and on us, in spilling the blood also 'contains,' in both senses of that word as immanence and control, something like the hysteria that is just behind the image.

I have dwelt on all these shoes so much, because I think we have to know what we are to make of all this — a mustering of attitudes and assumptions that range from the shared and the public to the private significance of the fetish. It is evident, I think, that this shoe is not merely presented as an autonomous "fact" independent of any consideration of perspective, purpose, values and interests, but rather possesses, and is possessed by, assumptions so deeply held and so much a part of the cumulative effect of the novel that they seem to be attributes of perception. The shoes not only express attitudes and values, for the image is not simply observed, or received, but is itself produced in a context of associations, attitudes, and feelings, by cognitive categories learned and utilized throughout the novel; more, the shoes embody some common set of attitudes and values. Interpretation cannot distinguish here between what is "in" the "text" and what is supplied by the reader. But if we have no personal knowledge of this common ground of assumptions, by what standards of judgement and evaluation can we argue for the rationality of interpretation unconstrained by this perspective? Are we elicited for a self-effacing objectivity disengaged from the subjective and the personal,

and perhaps from the troubling dimensions of involvement in the experience of perceptions?

IV

This is not simply a rhetorical question, since Stan Smith argues for the efficacy in the novel of an "estrangement effect" on the Brechtian model, a motif of artifice which "establishes a distance between audience and event, in contrast to "empathy," which "invites the audience to collapse the distance between itself and the events depicted, to participate self-indulgently in a [and here he quotes Plath] 'mirror-looking narcissistic experience'."³⁹ "The main principle of control in The Bell Jar," he argues, "lies precisely in the manipulation of a series of contracts and analogies between 'personal experience' and a variety of forms of 'artifice'." Sylvia Plath, he claims, "uses the psychological alienation of the heroine, Esther Greenwood, to reinforce this aesthetic alienation," and "Esther comes to view her own life as an aesthetic construct, a perpetual self-manipulation, learning, like the babies she sees at the clinic, 'all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world.'" (Smith, 248)

If the younger Esther stands in schizoid relation to her own experiences, retrospectively analyzing and interpreting them, endlessly turning them over in her mind in some kind of Proustian recherche, Esther the narrator assumes the same kind of stance to her past Plath, the actual author, seems to be manipulating a continuous and ironic parallel between the condition of schizophrenic self-alienation and the familiar devices of narrative technique. (Smith, 250)

But if, as Smith argues, Esther's impulse to anaesthetic response is

elicited by Plath as an aesthetic response, does this mean that the novel attempts to close together language and feeling into conflictless and behaviourally coherent patterns of experience and technique? Is there no experience of legitimate conflict, no experience of the presence of contradictions, of the simultaneous existence of opposites, no experience of the way in which language and feeling creates while denying at the same time a whole world which monopolizes a woman's spirit, her experiences, her entire body? Estrangement understood as an aesthetic effect of technique itself insulates the reader from the threats of affective disturbance implicit in the work. It obscures, in fact, the way in which the work affects the reader, and this is important, since what Plath does to Esther is unearthed by Smith precisely in finding out what she does to him through Esther: "The hard-boiled narrative tone suggests a narrator herself numbed in some significant way, left cold by her own past. . . . Esther the narrator seems pre-occupied with insulating her own past self under the bell jar of a retrospective fiction. . . . This double 'estrangement effect' acts as a critical, ironic dimension in the novel" (Smith, 250). But if the 'estrangement effect'"establishes a distance between audience and event, in order to demonstrate that this action is not a metaphysical absolute, in which all participate as private sufferers, but an historically situated condition, towards which one can take a critical stance" (Smith, 247) it is not surprising that Esther, as Smith says, "continually assumes the role of an aesthetic voyeur towards her own past and present experience" (Smith, 249); she could hardly do more, since the "action" Smith speaks of is, in fact, the recovery of the events of her own life, and it is in just her own capacity as private sufferer that Esther

undergoes the closure of a controlling, insulating, estranging bell-jar universe. The ironic detachment of "the disinterested narrator" may itself be a result of the authorial manipulation of language and reality to the point where the individual trying to express and live her own emotions finds herself internalizing experience which she feels, and somehow knows, is not her own. Where do we find "ourselves" in "our" responses; if we have no reflective knowledge of ourselves, we have no point of view which can be called our own. Without reflectively knowing the contradictions in our experience we cannot arrive at being truly "ourselves," in any final sense, and Esther's struggle to find out what is her own is an attempt to discard and deny what experience has done to her. To discover what has been done to Esther may be to find out what has caused our own propensities to numbness, since both author and critic refract and condense onto her imaginative and emotional responses the subtle violences of perpetuated emotional needs mediated to and against perceptive experience, and these are implicated in the creative process which is the situation and condition of her very existence.

If we can ourselves break through the impulse to ironic estrangement, The Bell Jar reveals what Esther does with what is done to her, how she uses her victimized numbness against the conventionalizations of response which flatten and desensitize her whole life. Much of the novel involves her struggle with authorial intention for control of her own life. On Boston Common Esther seeks to establish a new sexual identity as Elly Higginbottom, who she endows with a fictitious orphaned past and a speculative future which contains the possibility of being both sexual and domestic. The normative categories of the novel will not allow this, and

in discussing those social roles Stan Smith himself identifies

One way in which the character Esther tries to reject the role to which she has been assigned [and here we must ask "assigned by who?"] and assume a manipulative power over others, is to invent a surrogate identity. It is clear that, initially, she sees it as a kind of authorial intervention in the plot of her own life, that gives her the opportunity to dissociate herself from the actions she commits, as the novelist employs a persona to establish a critical distance between himself [sic] and his narrative. Assuming the persona of an imaginary Chicago orphan, 'Elly Higginbottom,' whose faintly ludicrous name becomes a private joke at the expense of her victims, Esther feels a godlike invulnerability. (Smith, 250)

Although Esther claims that her life became out of control her summer in New York, that she feels she is being steered "like a numb trolley bus" rather than steering herself, that she feels "very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo," and that her relationship with Doreen is to blame for much of this, it is in fact Esther herself, and not cosmopolitan, cynical, sarcastic, sexual, decadent Doreen, who, knowing the possible consequences, initiates the pick-up of the two women by Lenny Shepherd:

"And what, may I ask, are two nice young girls like you doing all alone in a cab on a nice night like this?

"We're on our way to a party," I blurted, since Doreen had gone suddenly dumb as a post and was fiddling in a blasé way with her white lace pocketbook cover.

"That sounds boring," the man said, "Whyn't you both join me for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? "

The laughter should have warned me. It was a kind of low, know-it-all snicker, but the traffic showed signs of moving again, and I knew that if I sat tight, in two seconds I'd be wishing I'd taken this gift of a chance

to see something of New York besides what the people on the magazine had planned out for us so carefully.

"How about it Doreen?" I said.

"How about it Doreen?" the man said

"Well, all right," Doreen said to me. I opened the door . . . (9-10)

Doreen here replies only to Esther, and also, when Lenny offers a drink, orders her old-fashioned through Esther, while playing coy and seemingly oblivious to Lenny's attentions to her. Esther, recognizing her own inexperience and unfamiliarity with cocktails, chooses vodka because of its advertising image, and when Lenny, surprised, looks at her "more closely," asking if she will have a mixer, she successfully bluffs that she always has it plain, thereby implying substantial previous experience and hard-drinking straight alcohol toughness, at odds not only with her fear that she "might make a fool of myself by saying I'd have it with ice or soda or gin or anything," but, given the circumstances, at odds too with her concern for clearness and purity as images of taste. When Lenny slides his hand around Doreen's bare arm and gives her a squeeze, Esther is surprised "that Doreen didn't let on she noticed what he was doing" and it is in this context that Esther takes refuge in her invention of Elly Higginbottom as a covering identity for herself:

"My name's Elly Higginbottom," I said. "I come from Chicago." After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston. (13)

But the safety of the pseudonym does not protect Esther from association with anything that she herself is going to say or do; rather it here protects Esther's insecurities from Doreen's sexuality. Esther's drink makes her "feel powerful and godlike," in contrast to her "short,

scrunty" date, Frankie, who makes her feel freakish about her height, "gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow." So Frankie is no sexual threat, is contemptuously dismissed, literally looked down upon:

The thought of dancing with that little runt in his orange suede elevator shoes and mingy T-shirt and droopy blue sports coat made me laugh. If there's anything I look down on, its a man in a blue outfit. Black or gray, or brown, even. Blue just makes me laugh

"I better go now," Frankie said, standing up Nobody paid him any notice. (13-14)

Esther's invulnerable identity has some chinks in its armour, for when Lenny pays off Frankie, tells him to "Shut up and scram," for a minute the still-vulnerable Esther thinks that he is talking to her as well. But then she hears Doreen say "I won't come unless Elly comes" and Esther, buttressed in complicity, but feeling safe in her invulnerability, precipitates the escalation of events by agreeing to go to Lenny's apartment:

"Sure I'll come," I said. Frankie had wilted away into the night, so I thought I'd string along with Doreen. I wanted to see as much as I could. (14)

"I wanted to see as much as I could" Esther says, but Plath's novel can hardly contain even the defensiveness of Esther's perceptions when she tries to see the provocatively forbidden. Deep feelings of anxiety are revealed to be behind the assumption of god-like invulnerability, and insecurity is behind the manipulative power; Esther's fear of indifference finds verbal expression in aesthetic disinterestedness, the "cynical-naive eye," as Stan Smith calls it:

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time. (14)

Smith's own comment on this passage is that "the straightforward callous prose is here undercut by currents of powerful irony which subvert the whole disinterested stance. For the aestheticism is redefined, implicitly, as the rationalized fear and insecurity of a pathological squeamishness, a social strategy that insulates one from feelings which expose and entrap. Omniscience is redefined as a pose assumed to evade the suspicion of callowness and ignorance" (Smith, 249-250). But Smith's attribution of pathology defends us against Esther's fears and insecurities, both isolating and redoubling her defensive activities. Smith's argument here is not by demonstration, by submission to the arbitration of evidence regarding Esther's "historically situated condition," but by persuasion, by appeal to the verifiable, though "implicit," facts of his own response. It is not irony which "subvert/s/ the whole disinterested stance," but Smith's own subjectivity, perceptions, and understanding which subvert his argument for an ironic detachment in the face of a threat of affective disturbance.

A critical stance and vocabulary based on an external and "objective" sociology analysing the 'givens' of life and literature sees aesthetic experience in and of a pattern of determined sequence (plot, form, structure). This language of technique comprehends fear, insecurity, anxiety as technique — by treating barely mastered elements

of fantasy and desire and their roots in anxiety as technique, disturbing affective experience is integrated into a restrictive and collective identity; it functions to reify the novel, and the over-riding emphasis is on verifying the work of art (and culture)-as-given.

At Lenny's apartment, Esther sits

cross-legged on one of the beds and tried to look devout and impassive like some businessmen I once saw watching an Algerian belly dancer, but as soon as I leaned back against the wall under the stuffed rabbit, the bed started to roll out into the room, so I sat down on a bearskin on the floor and leaned back against the bed instead. (17)

Smith again notes that "the simile establishes the discrepancy between the assumed indifference and the prurience it scarcely conceals; it also shows Esther characteristically watching the audience rather than the act, thus reinforcing the morbid selfconsciousness beneath the unruffled exterior. The uncooperative bed merely confirms the failure of the pose, so, that, very rapidly " Esther comes to feel insignificant, demoralized, small, lonely. "Against this depressing reality - of exclusion, marginality - the impassive narrative voice of Esther - both as character and 'author' - has to reassert itself:

I noticed, in the routine way you notice the color of somebody's eyes, that Doreen's breasts had popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons as she circled belly-down on Lenny's shoulder, thrashing her legs in the air and screeching, and then they both started to laugh and slow up, and Lenny was trying to bite Doreen's hip through her skirt when I let myself out the door before anything more could happen and managed to get downstairs by leaning with both hands on the banister and half sliding the the whole way. (18-19)

"The paratactic style of the reportage in its deliberate 'routine way' attempts to contain the emotional reaction in the panicky headlong flight which the movement of the sentence enacts " (Smith, 252). I don't know what reaction to the expression of feelings of exclusion and marginality the personalization of an "uncooperative" bed contains for the critic, but the point I want to make has to do with the ambivalence of reaction, in that the "paratactic style" of the passage not only "enacts" as Smith says, but expresses the "panicky headlong flight," since it is we who are literally out of breath, in enacting the style. If style is both expression and defense, where is the locus of the "containment"? In spite of Smith's sensitivity to the emotions of the novel, here we see the characteristically disinterested critic watching Esther; the critic positioned outside the world of the novel, registers events within the field of his study, relating to them primarily as serial data and information to be processed, conceptualized and manipulated. Smith continues, "from this point onwards, her perception of the world as an unreal backcloth for an unreal identity recurs, as her alienation deepens" (Smith, 252) and so abandons Esther to her "alienation" rather than explore, as he earlier suggested, the ways in which her (and our) rationalized fears and insecurities are social strategies that insulate from "feelings which expose and entrap."

The events in Lenny's apartment do not demonstrate that Esther's "spurious authorial detachment" fails her, but that the prurience Smith rightly identifies in that assumed indifference is compromised; "There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the

room." Esther is not excluded by her voyeurism, but included and affected by events, more than her impulse to voyeurism and control will allow. "More and more" - the situation is escalating out of control; in cognizance of having reached her own limits, Esther "lets herself out," and flees further involvement (she has promised Doreen that she would "stick around" if Lenny "tried anything funny") in a "panicky headlong flight" down the stairs. But immediately she is on the street, she re-orientes herself and compulsively walks the exactly forty-eight blocks back to her hotel:

Walking has never fazed me. I just set out in the right direction, counting the blocks under my breath, and when I walked into the lobby of the hotel I was perfectly sober and my feet only slightly swollen, but that was my own fault because I hadn't bothered to wear any stockings. (19)

Esther's turgid feet, unprotected by any prophylactic stockings, and her explanation reveal just how severe is her disturbance by the scene, and how necessary the compulsive need for punishment. Although Esther tells us that she "always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together," her disturbing view of Doreen and Lenny seems to me to enact just that imagination in a close approximation to fantasies of the primal scene of childhood.

Faced with the deeply disturbing subjectivity of her experience, Esther is only concerned with feeling secure, and in trying to deprive the novel of the experience of conflict, Plath deprives her also of the occasion for negation and reflective self-examination. Functionally, she deprives us of the experience and the occasion as well; the problem for the novel and the reader is how to deal with this material without the outright

didacticism that Marjorie Perloff derives from her reading of the novel: "The hardest thing in the world to do — and it is especially hard when one is young, female and highly gifted — is simply to be oneself" (Perloff, 521). Most of us, I think, have recognized this with some difficulty in our own lives, and the novel both reinforces this recognition and questions the "self" we, and Esther, have become. "Only when Esther recognizes that she will never be a Jody, a Jay Cee, a Doreen, or a Mrs. Guinea, that she will never marry a Buddy Willard, a Constantin, or a Dr. Gordon, that she wants no lesbian affairs with a Joan or a Dee Dee — does the bell jar lift, letting Esther once again breathe 'the circulating air'" (Perloff, 521). But to argue for this resolution of the novel, Perloff has to argue that by the end of the novel Esther "has learned something very important. Isolation, Sylvia Plath suggests, the terrible isolation Esther feels when, one by one, her props crumble, is paradoxically the result of negating one's own separateness"; and she has to ignore that Plath has herself propped up not only those impossibilities cited, but more, from the beginning. Perloff's point is that "as a schizophrenic, Esther is, of course, a special case, but her intensity of purpose, her isolation, her suffering, and finally her ability to survive it all with a sense of humor, make her an authentic, indeed an exemplary heroine of the seventies" (Perloff, 521-522). Perloff's "of course," as we have seen, begs a lot of questions as to how the attribution of "madness" functions to reify Esther's perceptions; Perloff finds Esther "authentic, even exemplary" because "Esther's experience differs from that of so-called 'normal' girls in degree rather than in kind. It is simply a stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her identity, to be

herself rather than what others expect her to be" (Perloff, 509). But it is precisely the forging of Esther's identity that is in question, since what seems to make Esther "a special case" for Perloff -- the "stylized" and "heightened" experience Perloff finds through Esther -- seems to me to be as much a function of Perloff's model as of Esther's character. The model is explicitly R. D. Laing's

description of the split between inner self and outer behaviour that characterizes the schizoid personality: "The 'inner self' is occupied in phantasy and observation. It observes the processes of perception and action. Experience does not impinge . . . directly on this self, and the individual's acts are the provinces of a false-self system." The condition Laing describes is precisely that of Esther at the beginning of the novel. . . . If we take the division of Esther's self as the motive or starting point of the novel's plot, the central action of The Bell Jar may be described as the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self system so that a real and viable identity can come into existence. (Perloff, 508-509)

Esther's "authenticity" as a living character is for Perloff in her viability as an example; as Perloff's own conditional shows, Esther is for her very much what Perloff needs Esther to be for the novel to be what Perloff claims it is. Inasmuch as similar subjective demands on Esther are true for both author and every reader of the novel, a "forged," "real," "viable" identity in its attempt to control experience is very much the problem, and the controlling consciousness of the novel as it works from motive through plot is as almost entirely positivistic as Perloff's/Laing's/Plath's model, in its denial, splitting, projecting, introjecting, reprojecting, and controlling the embodiment of those

possibilities which Esther recognizes to cause her discomfort.

Esther's attempts to be "herself" range from her blatant decision to have "nothing at all to do with" Doreen after her drunken collapse at Esther's door, and the "ugly concrete testimony" which Esther doesn't see of her "own dirty nature" (25), through the attitudes to Mrs. Willard's maxims, kitchen mat and "sensible brown shoes," to the rejection of those "weird old women" who "all wanted to adopt me in some way, and for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them" (248). All are identified, set-up as straw figures, and vanquished. Just how they are set-up is shown by Perloff's own lengthy descriptive identification:

In the course of her quest, Esther is attracted by a bewildering variety of female roles: Dodo Conway, Catholic mother of 6 1/2, whose face is perpetually lit up by a "serene, almost religious smile" (p. 129); Buddy Willard's mother, professor's wife and leading citizen, whose words of wisdom are regularly quoted by her brainwashed and adoring son; Doreen, the Southern blonde sex kitten who always knows how to get her man; Betsy, innocently happy and uncomplicated Midwestern fashion model; Jody, loyal friend, "practical and a sociology major" (p. 83), who instinctively knows how to spice up scrambled eggs; Philomena Guinea, best-selling novelist, whose endowed scholarship Esther holds at college; and finally, Jay Cee, the successful editor who "knew all the quality writers in the business" (p. 6). Even a Russian girl translator, whom Esther glimpses only briefly at the UN, becomes an object of envy: "I wished with all my heart I could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another" (p. 82).

But although she envies Dodo's placid contentment, Jay Cee's cleverness, and Betsy's innocence, Esther quickly discovers that each of these women is, despite her particular gift or talent, essentially a flawed human being. Doreen's intrinsic vulgarity and triviality are symbolized by her fluffy cotton candy blonde hair, which is, on close inspection, dark at the roots. Eternally pregnant Dodo is little more than a mindless misshapen animal. Refined and cultured Mrs. Willard lets her husband walk all over her as if she

were one of the wool mats she makes as a hobby. Philomena Guinea's novels turn out to be endless soap operas, "crammed . . . with long suspenseful questions "like "Would Evelyn discern that Gladys knew Roger in her past?" wondered Hector feverishly" (p. 44). Jay Cee is a walking time clock, devouring manuscripts with mechanical regularity and reserving her emotional commitment for her potted plants. Betsy is "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (p. 125); the Russian translator is no more than a "little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles" (p. 82); and even Jody, the truly "nice" girl, seems to have a touch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in her when she plots with Mrs. Greenwood to distract Esther from her illness by taking her along on a double date. (Perloff, 513-514)

But if it is "Esther's" discovery that all these women are "flawed," is it necessary to point out that Perloff's language and tone is itself hardly neutral in its appeal to what she appears to take to be our faintly negative attitudes towards fecund and placid maternity, towards religious serenity, towards leading citizens and their words of wisdom, towards blonde sex kittens, towards hair dyed blonde, towards fashion models, towards best sellers and quality writers, even towards happy and uncomplicated innocence, or enthusiasm for indoor gardening? She is, of course, echoing the novel, and if Esther's word "barking" to describe the speech of a "stern muscular girl with no makeup" gives the lie to Esther's wish, and is probably belabouring the point that there are no perfect woman models, surely Doreen's "symbolic" dark roots are extraneous, since Doreen has been rather insidiously set-up for such perceptions from the beginning:

I guess one of my troubles was Doreen.
I'd never known a girl like Doreen before.
Doreen came from a society girls' college down South and had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer. . . .

Doreen singled me out right away. . . .

"What are you sweating over that for?" Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing gown, filing her long, nicotine-yellow nails with an emery board, while I typed up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist. . . .

"You know old Jay Cee won't give a damn if that story's in tomorrow or Monday." Doreen lit a cigarette and let the smoke flare slowly from her nostrils so her eyes were veiled. "Jay Cee's ugly as sin," Doreen went on coolly. "I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise." (5-6)

It is not Esther who is singled out, but Doreen who is here singled out as the smoking devil who tempts the hard-working girl with her sense of her own superiority, singled out for the come-down which Esther, while watching the movie of the football romance with Betsy, knows, and which we know, the hard sneering sexy girl always gets. As most writers on the novel have noted, Doreen is carefully played off against Betsy, and Esther decides "deep down" to "have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart." (25) But one of the problems for the novel is that Doreen won't stay lying humbled in the pool of her vomit where she belongs, but keeps popping up, with no apparent ill-effects, in the most improbable of guises. Doreen the vamp can be humbled by the novel, but when she appears as a motherly nurse to Esther, Esther thinks she must be Betsy. Betsy, meanwhile, has been relegated to her own vomit. Esther callously closes her door against Doreen and leaves her lying asleep in her pool of vomit, in the light of the hall that "wasn't night and it wasn't day, but some lurid third interval that had suddenly slipped between them and would never end," (23) but later wakes herself in a "wan light that might have been evening and might have been dawn" (51) to be nursed by

Doreen: "I felt a sort of expert tenderness flowing from the ends of her fingers. She might have been Betsy or my mother or a fern-scented nurse . . ." (52) The reference to a tender and caring mother here is important, since the dominant portrait of Mrs. Greenwood is as "a hopelessly rigid, strong-willed, loveless person" (Perloff, 513), and the problem of whether this is true to Aurelia Plath, or is "unfair," as Marjorie Perloff puts it, is for her "totally beside the point. What matters is that her daughter sees her in this light. Given such a mother image, she must clearly find her models elsewhere." But the point here is that what Esther sees is mediated by the context of her immediate needs. Thus, as opposed to the "dark roots" of Doreen's blonde hair, what Esther sees here is "her blonde hair lit at the tips from behind like a halo of gold," and Doreen's particular smell is here that of "a fern-scented nurse"; Esther's same perceptions in an earlier and different context take on divergent significance:

Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing gowns the color of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity. She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them. (6)

In another context, the "dumpy and muscular" wall-eyed nurse who prepares Esther for her shock treatments at Dr. Gordon's private clinic has "a vague, medicinal stench" which "emanated from her flesh" (160), and though obviously all nurses do not smell the same, the choice of terms and language is biased according to the context of the perceptions.

Similarly, feeling "purged and holy and ready for a new life," Esther

notices that Doreen the nurse "made no move to take out a cigarette, and as she was a chain smoker this surprised me," whereas earlier, retreating back to her hotel room from the scene in Lenny's apartment, Esther is suffocated by Doreen's smoke, which seems to have "materialized out of thin air as a sort of judgment," and becomes furious at the windows which won't open so that she can lean out into the fresh air.

She is safe and protected in that room, but stifled and trapped as well. The fixed glass windows insulate her from the noise of the city, but the silence, her own silence, depresses her. She is separated; the city hangs flat and two-dimensional in her window, the telephone that "could have connected me up with things" sits "dumb as a death's head." She decides to take a hot bath:

There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them. Whenever I'm sad I'm going to die, or so nervous I can't sleep, or in love with somebody I won't be seeing for a week, I slump down just so far and then I say: "I'll go take a hot bath."

I meditate in the bath. The water needs to be very hot, so hot you can barely stand putting your foot in it. Then you lower yourself, inch by inch, till the water's up to your neck.

I remember the ceiling over every bathtub I've stretched out in. I remember the texture of the ceilings and the cracks and the colors and the damp spots and the light fixtures. I remember the tubs, too: the antique griffin-legged tubs, and the modern coffin-shaped tubs, and the fancy pink marble tubs overlooking indoor lily ponds, and I remember the shapes and sizes of the water taps and the different sorts of soap holders.

I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath.

I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near onto an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again. I don't believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I

feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water.

I said to myself: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure."

The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft white hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby. (21-22)

The scene concentrates the ambivalence of all the thematic images of the novel: the retreat to a womb-like refuge that feels safe but is deathly; stifling enclosure in a bell-jar which is also insulating in its separation from experience which threatens; the suicidal dangers of breathing the invigorating fresh air; the telephones, cords, wires, strings, threads that connect, but guide or control too; the disturbing reflection or mirror (that in this case makes Esther's face look too much like the silver associated with Doreen); Esther's own depressing silence, versus her chorus of voices, or the voices that possess her; the coffin-like bath of warm water, later opposed to a bath-like coffin filled with dirt; the shedding-off of impingements to achieve the purity and innocence of a new-born baby. But just as Esther's instances of despair range from the profound to the puerile, though the relative ordering of her list is entirely subjective for each one of us, in just the same way what Esther remembers is according to subjective association for her, and so entirely pertinent, but this pertinence for us becomes a mere catalogue.

The connections between the private and the public, and vice versa, is consistent and will bear discussion later in the context of what the

novel proposes as Esther's insight into her recovery after breakdown. Here Esther says "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath," but the self that feels remains to be felt; rebirth as a theme of the novel, as several critics have claimed, is a rite de passage of adjustment to society,⁴⁰ but the adjustment here is reflexively ironic, since the ritual is itself a defense against conflict, disturbance, sexuality, involvement. Against these defences the themes are underlined: Esther's suicide attempt lying in the cold dirt of the dark cellar is the malign and unsuccessful counterpart to her benign success at rebirth in the "clean hot water" of her bath, even down to the detail of wrapping herself in her "showerproofed" non-absorbent new black macintosh, which replaces the "soft white hotel bath towel."

Teresa de Lauretis believes of the novel that "its success and forcefulness are due in large part to the author's ability to integrate the historical, diachronic self (the heroine in her contemporary world) with a synchronic, timeless mythical structure, the descent-ascent pattern, in which the heroine mediates the transition from one world to another, or from one state of being to another. The theme of rebirth, underlying the narrative pattern, and witnessing the attainment of her consciousness and self-determination, makes of Esther a true culture-heroine" (de Lauretis, 173). But to what extent does the narrative pattern of the novel itself structure and define Esther's consciousness; and more, defines the "her" and the "self" that is determined? To what extent are we capable of feeling Esther's attempts to recover the realities of felt and painful experience in the face of narrative controls that displace affect, and are themselves a strategy of the novel for dealing with

untenable involvement? For de Lauretis, "The Bell Jar is the account of a journey, of Esther's descent into the hell of self-disintegration, her rebirth, and ascent to self-unity and freedom," and the "freedom" she claims for Esther is further defined -- "freedom for Esther is availability, refusal of classifications, growth, diversity" (de Lauretis, 182). This would be a working definition for us all, but does not the novel itself restrict, classify, shrink and deaden response, and itself seek to close off the possibility of Esther to ever negate that which negates her? The novel like de Lauretis, would have us believe that ironically, "Esther's problem" is her inability to "accept the either-or of culturally defined roles which seem to be the only alternatives open to her" (de Lauretis, 182) when her problem may be that plot, technique, structure, imagery, and the need for mythic ritual, bring her to such a state that her particular attempt to die is all that is left her. Hence, the "major themes and motifs" de Lauretis identifies in the novel -- "the guilt of loneliness, desire for purgation, purification by water, the warmth of womb-like enclosures, sleep, death, shrinking, disintegration, dissolution . . . reappear throughout the novel's imagery, not at random but following a specific movement, which is the movement of Esther's inner journey. Especially recurrent are the images of fragmentation, disintegration, separateness, isolatedness, unrelatedness. They recur more and more often until Chapter 13, in a crescendo that culminates with Esther's attempted suicide" (de Lauretis, 175). De Lauretis' "crescendo" indicates just how pivotal the event is in the novel's structure, and she unwittingly elaborates just how we are prepared for it:

[Esther's associations] show Plath's constant strenuous effort to express experience by verbal equivalents: the elaborate similes, the images recurring at different moments in slightly different contexts are all carefully chosen to represent fractions of change, minimal shifts in consciousness But in addition to imagery and word association, there is another aspect of stylistic elaboration of the personal experience that we must consider, the arrangement of the time sequence. Almost all flashbacks occur within Chapters 1 to 9, during Esther's stay in New York. They tell of Esther's experience up to that time, supplying background and psychological motivation for her present apprehension of reality. The mere position of the flashback constitutes a built-in interpretation of the heroine, her culture, the reasons for her present state. (de Lauretis, 181)

"Plath's constant, strenuous effort," the similes and images that are "carefully chosen," the elaboration, the recurrences, the "represent"-ation of the nuances of a life, the "arrangement," the telling-of, "supplying" background and motivation, the "built-in" interpretation are all quite apt — Plath's novel accounts for Esther, explains what has happened to Esther, knows all the answers to her life, and for that reason knows nothing but conventional patterns and seeks to indoctrinate us too into the lie. Hence, the "timeless mythical structure" de Lauretis claims for the novel is not only carefully patterned and controlled for effect, but also defines and controls a subjectivity, and it is in the face of this that Esther's questioning novel tries to come to terms with what has happened to her, and in her inarticulate silence and awful despair seeks to re-own the prochronics⁴¹ of her life, her madness, her suicide.

The movement of Plath's novel is downwards to the lowest point of suicide, as a "prelude to a rediscovery of self," as Tony Tanner puts it,

then from this point upwards and outwards, through recovery and adjustment to a social "freedom" precariously supported and marred by a disaffected ironic detachment:

the suicide attempt is the prelude to a rediscovery of self expedited by electric-shock treatment in an institution. And this rediscovery of self is experienced as a lifting of the bell jar. 'I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.' The point is that the person in the bell jar is imprisoned in the airless landscape of his [sic] own mind and memory, with no chance of any 'circulating air'. 'To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.' But the stuffy air inside the bell jar is the air of self not world. (And there is an implication in the book that 'ordinary' people are 'under bell jars of a sort'.) So freedom for Esther consists of getting out of the claustrophobic prison of her own detached self -- not just out of the institution, though that may seem to be the most visible prison, but out of the bell jar. The book ends with the experience of a second birth and the hope of a new life. (Tanner, 273-274)

"Patched, retreaded and approved for the road," is how Esther aptly characterizes the "rebirth," the "hope," the "freedom," for if Esther is "reborn," the self given birth is just a new addition to her wardrobe of old clothes, as the novel makes clear: "I kept shooting impatient glances at the closed boardroom door. My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans" (275). And rather than the "availability, refusal of classifications, growth, diversity" which de Lauretis posits as the hallmarks of Esther's "freedom," she is by the last pages of the novel desperately accommodating herself to the pre-determined expectations of not only her sanity, but her liberty as well, by the psychiatric board of examiners:

"Interviews!" Valerie snorted. "They're nothing! If they're going to let you out, they let you out."

"I hope so." (271)

Pausing, for a deep breath on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks. 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. (275)

Esther's dissimulations here for an audience of persons both known and anonymous are not just "the thread that might lead me back to my old, bright salesmanship,"³⁶ the clever manipulative avoidances they were, say with Mr. Manzi and her college dean, but are much more pertinent, and even life-enhancing, since they get her, in contradiction to Tanner, not out of the bell jar, but precisely out of the institutional prison. Her pause for a deep breath on the threshold is doubly ironic, since she herself makes it clear that she is going neither out of her old claustrophobic self - "How did I know that someday -- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (271), nor into a world free of constricting contingencies -- the "implication" Tanner finds in the novel is made more explicit by Plath than that --

What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort.
(268)

In the words of the novel, Esther "enroll[s]" in the asylum, later

wonders how the asylum librarian, "an alumna of the asylum herself knew she had graduated at all." (274)

Esther's wondering question is Plath's defensive self-righteousness, and does not conceal that the world outside the bell jar is the same as the convoluted world inside. What Esther has learned is to identify herself with the existence imposed on her, and the terrible threat of the shock treatments administered her only "expedite" that process. "If anyone does that to me again I'll kill myself," Esther threatens Dr. Nolan, and she could hardly make her meaning more plain.

Doctor Nolan said firmly, "You won't have any shock treatments here. Or if you do," she amended, "I'll tell you about it beforehand, and I promise you it won't be anything like what you had before. Why," she finished, "some people even like them." (214)

The firmness of Dr. Nolan's reply to Esther's direct threat is equivocally amended, and she quickly finishes her statement by meaning quite the opposite. As David Holbrook points out "Dr. Nolan promises, but only to re-assure her patient, and to prepare her for a greater coercion she coerces in such a nice way" (Holbrook, 103, 102). In the event, she betrays the intent if not the letter of her promise to Esther, and orders a new series of shock treatments on a few moment's notice. Though Esther's social improvement quickly coincides with this apparently effective treatment, which ends "after a brief series of five" (243), Esther herself, as Gayle Whittier points out, "protests throughout most of her hospitalization that her mental state is unchanged, but as no one believes in stasis (only in forward or backward steps), she is not believed" (Whittier, 144).

What she learns as an apt student of her education in the manners of the asylum is that her expressions of felt meaning will not be believed; in order to survive, the taboos on speaking the verboden reality must be believed in and acted upon. Just as Dr. Nolan's care begins with promises to Esther but ends in the betrayal of those promises in electro-convulsive shock treatments, so the initial therapeutic interviews of her earlier psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon, made a brief attempt at dialogue and understanding, only to end, too, in her commitment to shock treatments. After her first horrible experience of those electro-convulsive treatments at Doctor Gordon's private clinic, Esther announces to her mother that she is "through with that Doctor Gordon You can call him up and tell him I'm not coming next week" (163). Esther is feeling alienated and is aware that she is alienated, and angry. Her mother smiles in reply "I knew my baby wasn't like that those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital. . . . I knew you'd decide to be all right again." The point of Mrs. Greenwood's reply is not, as more than one reviewer of The Bell Jar has suggested, that Esther's mother "is reproduced as a banal and apathetic parent whose reason for being -- fictional reason, at least -- is to serve as a target for her daughter's hissing anger,"⁴² for we are given little reason to doubt that Esther's mother, and Doctors Gordon and Nolan, and Jay Cee, and the Willards, and Esther's college advisors all have her best interests at heart in their help and advice. Esther is victimized far less by banality and indifference than by persons of genuine good will, and by the worship of good intentions.

The simplest critical solution to Esther's anger in the face of the specious good is to write Esther off as a character altogether, and delegate

the problem to a difficult childhood, neurotic parents, or early traumatic sexual experiences. Pseudo-problems are solved by psychological cliché: "I hate her." Esther says of her mother in a scene identified by many critics as important.⁴³ "But Doctor Nolan only smiled . . . as if something pleased her very, very much, and said, "I suppose you do" (229). Critical stances that accept the scene as a resolution of important problems in the novel indicate the prestige of histrionics in Plath's works, but ignore Esther's (and Plath's) use of Freudian constructs in manipulating response: "in analysing the psychology of Sylvia Plath" David Holbrook writes, "I shall take certain works, like the poem Tulips, or the novel The Bell Jar, as largely autobiographical, while reminding myself that there is also a sense in which they are fictions, too" (Holbrook, 5). We perhaps need to be reminded of that, since, pushed to extreme statements by the novel, even a distinguished critic like Alfred Kazin has suggested that Plath might have benefited by (Esther's, or "Hannah Green's") therapy:

Sylvia Plath's problem was put perfectly by the psychiatrist in "Hannah Green's" I Never Promised You a Rose Garden — "The sick are all so afraid of their own uncontrollable power! Somehow they cannot believe that they are only people, holding only a human-sized anger."⁴⁴

That psychiatrist's remark, though, reveals a certain contempt for the individual and for subjective experience. In The Bell Jar Esther's therapy perpetuates and legitimizes her oppression, and "frees" Esther only from her own protests, in the deceptive mystification of her into believing that she is not oppressed, or that what she identifies as her oppression is for her own good, or that her feelings of oppression are invalidated as her own

fault and her own responsibility:

"It was like I told you it would be, wasn't it?" said Doctor Nolan, as we walked back to Belsize together through the crunch of brown leaves.

"Yes."

"Well, it will always be like that," she said firmly. "You will be having shock treatments three times a week — Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday."

I gulped in a long draught of air.

"For how long?"

"That depends." Doctor Nolan said, "on you and me." (242-243)

This is a subtle threat, as Esther's gasp for air indicates, by the doctor who retains total power over her patient; the coercion is simply disguised as firm reassurance.

The lesson of the asylum is one of a systematic absorbing blandness, of coercion and manipulation to retain this, and toleration which officially accommodates all forms of protest. Esther's expression of guilty hate towards her mother only elicits approval, while the loving tenderness which Doctor Nolan posits as motive and cause of sexual contact between women, cannot be found in the novel either between women, or between women and men. And it is not only that both incipient rebellion and the impulse to tenderness are reduced to the reasonable and banal terms of the asylum, but that these terms are the rationalizations of a social allegory that the novel would have both Esther and ourselves adopt. Doctor's prescription, author, and narrator's interpretation close together: "What I hate" Esther tells Dr. Nolan, "is the thought of being under a man's thumb A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line"

(249). But Doctor Nolan laughs at Esther's recitation of the Defense of Chastity, and scribbles the name and address of a gynecologist on her prescription pad. Esther makes an appointment to buy her freedom:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless (251)

The novel would have it that "freedom from fear" is the hallmark of Esther's "cure," and so Esther dispassionately and rationally plots her desperate and coldly depersonalized sexual relationship with Irwin, the mathematics professor. But if her relationship to Irwin merely inverts the sexual utility of his relationship to her and other women, it is more disturbing to me that the prevailing criticism of the novel accepts the "cure" and the "freedom" at face value:

Having passed through death, Esther learns, with the help of Dr. Nolan, to forge a new identity. It is important to note that Dr. Nolan, the only wholly admirable woman in the novel, is also the only woman whom Esther never longs to imitate or to resemble. The point is that Dr. Nolan serves not as model but as anti-model; she is the instrument whereby Esther learns to be, not some other woman, but herself. The new Esther takes off the mask: she openly rejects Joan's lesbian advances; she can cope with Irwin as well as with Buddy. (Perloff, 521)

The imagery of disintegration no longer occurs in the novel, to be replaced by Esther's conscious and intellectual efforts to come to grips with her self. She covers in reverse the path already trod downward, now meeting experience and controlling it to the extent it is possible to her. She faces the Other in her lesbian friend Joan, whom she rejects and yet feels much in common with — her destiny of

womanhood, mortality, frustration, defeat. She faces the sexual taboo and buys her freedom from it in the shape of a diaphragm. (de Lauretis, 179)

The pragmatics of "facing" the restrictions of contingent consequences, of "coping" with sexual desire, would have it that freedom is assured by contraception, that desire is a synonym for carefully plotted indulgence; but the rejection of Joan's non-impregnating potential for tenderness is much more of a problem for the novel, since although Irwin can be simply dismissed, Joan apparently has to die. Almost everyone has noticed that the novel tells us that Joan is Esther's "mirror image," both her "beaming double" and her "wry, black image," that Esther wonders if she "had made Joan up." But even though Joan's potentiality as a separate character with individual desires is subject to such stringent narratively-induced interpretative controls, the novel's inability to face Joan is precisely that "cool distance" at which Esther has always "known" her (220). This "narrative distance" as Stan Smith says, "is Esther's only surety for survival" and Joan's death becomes a dire necessity for the novel:

Structurally, Joan's suicide and Esther's recovery are arranged in an inverse ratio, to the extent that Esther is left wondering, at Joan's funeral, just what she thinks she is burying, the 'wry, black image' of her madness, or the 'beaming double of her old best self'. In a sense, the suicide of this surrogate is Esther's rebirth. (Smith, 259)

But structurally and narratively, Joan's "distance" and "inverse ratio" from Esther is just what I have shown Esther typically needs for a defense when she voyeuristically "sees" disturbing sexuality. The awareness of her forbidden transgressions into inviolate privacy are underlined by the novel

I had knocked on DeeDee's door that morning I waited

a few minutes and then, hearing no answer and thinking DeeDee must be out . . . I pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

At Belsize, even at Belsize, the doors had locks, but the patients had no keys. A shut door meant privacy, and was respected, like a locked door. One knocked, and knocked again, then went away. I remembered this as I stood, my eyes half-useless after the brilliance of the hall, in the room's deep, musky dark.

As my vision cleared, I saw a shape rise from the bed. Then somebody gave a low giggle. The shape adjusted its hair, and two pale, pebble eyes regarded me through the gloom. DeeDee lay back on the pillows, bare-legged under her green wool dressing gown, and watched me with a little mocking smile. A cigarette glowed between the fingers of her right hand.

"I just wanted . . ." I said.

"I know," said DeeDee

"Hello, Esther," Joan said then, and her cornhusk voice made me want to puke. (245-246)

Since Esther's wanting to puke here I think drastically closes the "cool" "narrative distance" from what she thinks she "sees" in the dark room, the problem for the reader is whether Esther's desire to puke is here only a social metaphor like the several other things throughout the novel, beginning with electrocutions (1) and bored daughters of wealthy parents (5), which she says "makes me sick," or whether Esther's repugnance to the lesbian potential she associates with Joan is actually the physical equivalent to ptomaine poisoning. The equations are made and Esther reacts to Joan's tentative advances towards contact with a cruel dismissal- "I don't like you. You make me puke if you want to know"- and walks out of the room "leaving Joan lying, lumpy as an old horse, across my bed" (248). However, when Esther is really and non-metaphorically sick with fear, faint and worried about her hemorrhaging, she does not then hesitate to walk in on Joan — who opens her door "with an expression of glad surprise" (259) — to

make pragmatic use of not only Joan's handy apartment, but callously equivocal and manipulative use of her care and concern as well. Esther wonders if she may be bleeding to death, but it is Joan who begins to cry in fear and frustration and despair at finding a doctor who will help, and who, when Esther is taxied to the emergency ward, suffers the trauma at Esther's vaginal examination: "Joan stood, rigid as a soldier, at my side, holding my hand, for my sake or hers I couldn't tell" (262).

If what Esther puts her through on this night in part accounts for Joan's return to the asylum, the tenet of the novel that narcissistic impulses are behind Joan's care and concern would have it that this return is not something for which Esther can take responsibility. Nor will the critics.⁴⁵ But Esther wonders if she is going to be blamed for Joan's return and wants, again, "to dissociate myself from Joan completely" (264). Nevertheless, as she returns to sleep after being told of Joan's disappearance, she makes the reproachful connection and sees Joan's face floating before her "bodiless and smiling, like the face of the Cheshire cat. I even thought I heard her voice, rustling and hushing through the dark, but then I realized it was only the night wind in the asylum trees" (265). Joan's face is in fact floating in the asylum trees, but there is a resistance among the critics to recognizing this. "After Joan is found hanged near the frozen pond in the heart of winter, Esther is again symbolically reborn" (Lameyer, 162). There is nothing metaphorical or symbolic about Joan's death though, as the extent of Doctor Nolan's angry denial of responsibility shows:

"Of course you didn't do it!" I heard Doctor Nolan say.
I had come to her about Joan, and it was the only time I

remember her sounding angry. "Nobody did it. She did it. And then Doctor Nolan told me how the best of psychiatrists have suicides among their patients, and how they, if anybody, should be held responsible, but how they, on the contrary, do not hold themselves responsible. . . . (270)

Doctor Nolan, of course, is herself one of those professional liberators of other people, and the energy of her angry attempt to reassure Esther is the inverted denial of the failure of her own responsible connections, the defense against her own vulnerability. The "freedom" Esther gains is in just this lack of connection, her failure of responsibility, the reduction in sensibility awarded her. Cured of her potential for vulnerability, Esther's life takes on the detachment of Plath's style, which as Tony Tanner has pointed out, "with its clear yet remote documentation of the strangeness of the world outside the glass, is a perfect bell-jar style" (Tanner, 263).

Marjorie Perloff would have it that we share to a degree "the central action of The Bell Jar . . . as the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self system so that a real and viable identity can come into existence" (Perloff, 509), and she seems quite correct to me, in that Esther's adaptation to the reasonable world of the asylum gives both her and ourselves great control over our lives, since the ironic disengagement proves its viability as a narrative and social strategy for dealing with the demands inherent in such a "healing." Esther's "freedom" complements our own character-defenses against experience; and if many of us with Stan Smith feel that Esther has "been numbed in some significant way" (Smith, 250), that Esther is mastered by such a bogus mastery of emotion, those feelings may be just all we have in our ability to respond to the evidence the novel gives us as to how "inner" demands for protection interlock with "outside" social

needs. Our own uneasy feelings in the face of this, point not just outwards towards the exposure of the enervating fraudulence of the asylum and other institutions constructed on the adaptive deflections of self-satisfying experiences, but point inwards, too, towards those strategies we ourselves build "in trying to hold onto a tautologically coherent universe whose integration of counterfeit experience with a reasonable coherence serves to mask the unspoken threats to human development inherent in the boundaries of that universe."⁴⁶

What we experience is usually just what we are supposed to experience, and in this regard, the connections Plath's novel elicits are made perfectly clear by Teresa de Lauretis:

Esther's story is totally entwined with a specific and fully detailed culture, from which it takes life and meaning. Her "madness" is presented as consubstantial with the world surrounding her. We perceive Esther's alienation not as individual and aberrant (hence, an illness), but as a quality of existence itself, defined in the confines of the book and in terms with which we are familiar. Esther's madness is not "another country," it is New York in the '50's, the small Massachusetts town, the United Nations, the private clinic, the state psychiatric ward where she is submitted to shock treatment, the cellar where she hides to die. To us, Esther's words sound as familiar as the echo of our own voices, as Plath's private vision has become today's public awareness. (de Lauretis, 173-174)

But the bogey of state institutions, for Esther and for us, shows that the problem for genuine experience of the novel, if that is to be possible, is precisely that "Plath's private vision has become today's public awareness." It may be that we no longer have any experience that we can call our own before the coherent rationalizations of Plath's resolutions; and it is not necessary to go into the question of Plath's

conscious or unconscious intentions here to point out that everything in de Lauretis' account defines both Esther and the predictability of our response: the "culture" gives ironically negative nurture and significance to Esther's life history, "entwined" in it; the subjectivity of Esther's madness is so strongly controlled as to be a "necessary consequence," indeed "consubstantial," with the world "surrounding" her; the very quality of Esther's alienated existence is "defined in the confines of the book," "in terms with which we are familiar." The overriding emphasis is on verifying the world as we already know it, the world the novel gives us. "I remembered everything" Esther says:

I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull.

Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them.

But they were part of me. They were my landscape. (267)

In the aetiology the novel provides, Esther's experiences account for her final state, and the conventional acceptability of the barren milestones of her clichéd landscape rationalizes rather than contradicts a psychological alienation which the novel insists is both inevitable and practically inescapable. Esther's memory and the novel's reality close together in rationalized acquiescence to an ironic detachment that determines perception, assessment, and interpretation; "Esther's landscape, with its confusing assortment of cadavers and diamonds, thermometers and beans, is, in heightened form, our landscape," Marjorie Perloff writes (Perloff, 522),

and the inner landscape of her memory is suffocatingly familiar, the free spaces where she and we might potentially recover richer, fuller, more alive experience, are closed off. Perloff's claim for the novel is that Esther's "intensity of purpose, her isolation, her suffering, and finally her ability to survive it all with a sense of humor, make her an authentic, indeed an exemplary heroine" (Perloff, 521-522), but Gayle Whittier's disagreement that Esther's "sense of humor rapidly diminishes as she is cured, and her detachment increases" (Whittier, 145) indicates that if Esther is to serve us as an example it must be as an example of the emotional costs of surviving with isolation and suffering. Esther is here nothing but a spectator of her own misery, fully possessed by the disengaged narrative voice that is the counterpart of those asylum figures "that weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (159).

V

The irony of Esther's recovery gives us a semblance of insight without disturbance, what Jerald Zaslove identifies as "counterfeit experience" which "closes together language and reality by channelling experience into conflictless and behaviourally coherent patterns of thought and action."

Official versions of reality monopolize feeling, and language becomes incapable of expressing more than the obvious language and reality [are manipulated] to the point where the individual trying to express and live his own emotions finds himself internalizing experience which he feels ("incompetently" knows!) is not his own. The struggle to find out what is one's own (in this sense struggle means dialectic) becomes a psychological battleground where one attempts (perhaps in vain) to discard and deny what experience has done to us. To discover what has been done to us is also to find out what has caused our "incompetence" — it is perhaps to see that what used to fit fits us no longer, that it was not made for us, that it had forced its power over us and that it was never "real" but was counterfeit. (Zaslove, 7)

Esther reveals the experience of a life lived in urgent helplessness before the coherent rationalizations of Plath's narrative controls, interpretations, resolutions. The logic of her recovery invents the needs that Esther "has," in order to be the satisfier of those needs. Though the implicit goal of normalization and conformism is submission and obedience to the delusory freedom that is proposed as autonomy, Esther nevertheless insists on "incompetently" trying that life she has been given against the reflections of a fuller life she can sometimes recover in memory and

association. For the mind and memory that possesses her both encompasses the world Plath prescribes her and stretches much farther: later, to the excitement of her visit to Paris, to her apparent reconciliation with acceptable motherhood, and earlier, to memories of childhood "running along the hot white beaches with my father," earlier still "as if through the keyhole of a door I couldn't open" to younger experiences, even into intra-uterine existence.

Against, and in the face of, her acquiescence to recovery, to viability, to the rationalizations of suffering, there is an "incompetence" that threatens to transcend the limitations the novel imposes, a persistent movement to cast off the interpretations of an impinging world, to avoid evaluation and assessment, to dissolve the connections of stringent perceptions. In the depressing silence of the first descent of the bell jar in her New York hotel room, Esther decides to take a hot bath and though she says she doesn't believe in baptism, the immersion successfully brings about internal conversion — she emerges feeling "pure and sweet as a new baby." She feels most alive in the destructuring of her alienated existence in her thrilling plunge down the slopes of the ski hill "through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past"; her hurtling descent inwards, downwards, backwards through the dark sides of the tunnel "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" is disrupted only by accident (108). Esther's attempts to bring about desired feelings of internal change towards purity, freedom, and safety, have, as I have tried to show, their roots in the prevailing anxiety, and her flight from this anxiety towards the inaccessible depths of her own self primarily

demonstrates the ways in which this anxiety holds in and limits personal crisis; but even the relative value of the questions that are put to us by the impulse to avoid is absorbed by the literary diagnosis Plath's novel makes, which is that even the appearance of movement through crisis towards less alienated ways of being, towards renewal and revitalization, is itself a death-wish. Esther's attempt to dis-member herself, as opposed to what the novel re-members, into a reality for her much deeper than what the surface connections will allow, is literally invalidated; consequently Esther, in her diagnosis and treatment by others who share the same view as the novel, becomes progressively more unsuccessful in her attempts to reappropriate her own birth and death as private and revitalizing experiences. The interpretative spaces are all closed off, smothered by the strict boundaries of passivity, masochism, and narcissism, until finally all that is left Esther is the final act of absenting herself from the impinging world, where both the world and the act are imposed on her. The point here is not that, as the novel would have it, the culpable world is hostile towards self-realization, the expression of honest feeling, and signs of growth in the regressive individual, but that Plath's rhetoric does not contain the power to undo its own mystifications of experience. The interpretative world implodes upon Esther, and she makes her feelings of claustrophobia articulate in a desire to smash things, including herself. The fashionable attempt to romanticize the mad project as visionary insight that keeps at bay the craziness of the normal world would have it that Esther has to metaphorically die in order to be symbolically reborn, but this does not disguise that the symbolic rebirth is a suicide, and a negative reinforcement of the definition of normality the novel imposes.

Esther's experience of her own special death in the thick velvet dark of the cellar is truncated by her discovery and hospitalization, and is paradoxically a movement into the world away from a space of inviolate inwardness, for the "tunnels" Esther travels down into herself prove to lead only to the prison-cell chambers where the electro-shocks are applied:

Doctor Nolan unlocked a door at the end of the hall and led me down a flight of stairs into the mysterious basement corridors that linked, in an elaborate network of tunnels and burrows, all the various buildings of the hospital Stretchers and wheelchairs were beached here and there against the hissing, knocking pipes that ran and branched in an intricate nervous system along the glittering walls Finally, we stopped at a green door with Electro-therapy printed on it in black letters. I held back, and Doctor Nolan waited. Then I said, "Let's get it over with," and we went in. (239-240)

Esther's experience, however, recognizes that "it" can never be "over with," and that Esther is simply patched together by Plath's novel in the bravado of her recovery, and held together by the lassitude and inertia of hypertrophied normality against the protesting impulse towards negativity, absence, silence. In identifying the negating impulse as towards numbing forgetfulness, towards blankness, towards Valerie's "marble calm," Plath's novel would persuade us that Esther in her provisional recovery is saved from the deathly impulse, at the cost of being sentenced not to forget. But if this is where the novel ends, it is also just where it begins, for it is of course the logic of the novel that Esther does not forget, that she counters the impulse towards numbing forgetfulness with the articulate observations of her own remembered experience. But those of us who feel that Esther is in some way an emotional casualty, must read the novel in the

light of what her "recovery" into "freedom" has done to the person who writes, must read the novel itself as Esther's response to her feelings of anaesthetization.

Alvarez writes of Plath's later verse that "what comes through most powerfully, I think, is the terrible unforgivingness of her verse, the continual sense not so much of violence - although there is a good deal of that -- as of violent resentment that this should have been done to her,"⁴⁷ and I concur with this in my feelings about the novel. So too, apparently, does Mrs. Aurelia Plath, Sylvia Plath's mother, who wrote to her daughter's publisher in the anticipation of the first American editions of The Bell Jar:

Practically every character in The Bell Jar represents someone -- often in caricature -- whom Sylvia loved; each person had given freely of time, thought, affection, and, in one case financial help during those agonizing six months of breakdown in 1953 as this book stands by itself, it represents the basest ingratitude. That was not the basis of Sylvia's personality 48

But what kind of basis does gratitude/ingratitude provide for a reading of the novel? For it seems to me, too, that my most striking sense of The Bell Jar is not so much of the working-out of emotional violence, as that the working-out of the contexts of deeply felt resentments is within and against an expression of guilty victimization that is just what Mrs. Plath's world won't allow. Esther herself rejects the prevalent critical notion of heroine and identifies herself as the suffering victim of an alienated life, as a "personality" that is, too, the victim of civic virtues. As Teresa de Lauretis points out, the chronology of the novel is

subjective and supplies "background and psychological motivation for Esther's present apprehension of reality. The mere position of the flashback constitutes a built-in interpretation of the heroine, her culture, the reasons for her present state" (de Lauretis, 181). But Esther, precisely as a "personality," both possesses and is possessed by "her" memories and these "built-in" interpretations; she is the protagonist who undergoes these central remembrances. "Her own" fantasies are not only constituted by what she experiences as the chorus of repressive voices that possess her, but constitute themselves on the basis of all these voices and their messages that have been planted in her mind throughout her history. She is faced with the choice to choose herself on the basis of (against, in the face of, or in compliance with), and in reference to, established images. Plath's is only the loudest and most strident of the voices that control the images; if Esther "herself" desires to regress into some period in her psycho-social past and start over, in the recovery of experience in the process of her novel she begins to discover that given stereotypes of self can only be repressive, and battles to free herself into her own future, as distinct from futures vicariously and lovingly prescribed, in a struggle with culturally approved stereotypes of herself that can be manipulated in exploring her own fantasies. Ellie Higginbottom, Elaine, and E. G. are obviously some among nameless others of Esther's fantasies, but it is Esther "herself" who is explored in the novel as the imaginary vehicle for her own existence. Under a mask of apparent disengagement does Esther impersonate herself as a made-up version of what she still feels herself to be? For her claims to be isolated and dissociated have to be evaluated as occurring within the particularly blatant form of narcissism that is

autobiography. From somewhere in the future Esther goes back, towards the vacant space of that annulment that would cancel out the alienated form of existence imposed on her, in an attempt to piece herself together again, to give herself, or to discover for herself, an emotional continuity within the problematics of her own time and a freer interpretive space. "Problematics" here means, in David Cooper's definition, "anything that puzzles or bewilders someone in the present, but which has the prior origin in that person's past in terms not only of family relations but also political structures that get mediated by family, school, etc., to the person." 49 Thus the chronology is not a problem to be solved by Esther or by us, but an experience which is problem-generating. This is not to focus critical attention on the aetiology the novel provides, but rather on the flash-backs, not as technique, but as the "organization and reconstruction not past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears and interests." 50

Holbrook believes that he has found Plath out in the novel:

in The Bell Jar, the 'I'-voice talks of the presents she received as a girl working in journalism:

For a long time afterwards I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with.

But whose baby? At the end of the novel there is no question of 'Esther' being married, or having a baby. The slip betrays quite clearly that Esther 'is' Sylvia Plath, and that when she speaks of 'being all right again' she is speaking of her own breakdown and recovery: the baby was Mrs. Ted Hughes's. (Holbrook, 5)

Yet ultimately, Plath's novel cannot be so much her autobiography as delineation of possibility; the 'facts' of Plath's life are mere facts, purely contingent and circumstantial to a reading of her novel. What connects the facts is that the connected facts create a story; and the reconstruction serves as a justification of present attitudes towards past experience. The point is not that "at the end of the novel there is no question of 'Esther' being married, or having a baby," but that we know this, are told this, from the beginning of the novel. Thus, there is in the novel an 'I' who is "all right again" from the beginning, who apparently has a baby, who is first Elly Higginbottom, though this is not her "real name" (13), then both Elly and Miss Greenwood "as if I had a split personality or something" (23), and then who becomes Esther only in Jay Cee's office, in an interview regarding choice and careers and plans for the future, the Esther Greenwood who ostensibly does not know at any given point what the future holds for her; and there is another Esther, who Gayle Whittier calls "Esther X, for she has presumably married and given birth to a child. But we learn virtually nothing of the later Esther, who significantly lacks an identified surname, as if halved by her survival" (Whittier, 130). But this is precisely the surname Holbrook feels compelled to give her.

The Esther who is the subject of her own story reconstructs rather than reproduces the past, and in doing so attempts to account for herself. We know that Esther is the narrator of her autobiography; we do not know that Esther is Plath. What we know of this Esther X is that she has in some way experienced the events of the novel, that those events take place in the past, that "although Esther X's reference to motherhood is made

almost in passing, it matters greatly to the reader's relieved sense of her as 'cured,' as having joined 'other women' in an acceptable way."

She narratively links being "all right" with motherhood and with commercial trappings that characterize femininity, lipsticks and decorated sunglasses cases, uniting the two by recognizing that these "gifts" were "free advertising," but nevertheless handing them down, like cultural heirlooms, to a baby. (Whittier, 131)

What is advertised is a possessive attitude towards her past in a sentimental awareness of herself in significant relation — but relation to what? For the consciousness of herself in relation to herself is not simply the assumption of an objective state of mind, since it is not clear whether the Esther Greenwood of the novel is a function of Esther X, or vice versa. Esther "reads" herself as the subject of her own story, but the rationalizations of the "I" discovering itself in the course of the novel "discovers" also the transformations of actual experience into individually and socially acceptable clichés. The novel has both an articulating and obscuring function; against Plath's interpretations, Esther pursues the unsolicited recovery of lost elements of earlier individual experience, and if these are not recoverable in the form of explicit, articulated knowledge, certain perceptions feel right, and that can be and is their own validation. She only knows what she knows without necessarily knowing how she has come to know it.

VI

How we come to know what Esther knows is an important problem for a reading of the novel since it involves a visionary empathy which elicits its own loyalties, commitments, and behaviours. What we know that Esther doesn't know, begs this question, since the "currents of irony" as Stan Smith puts it, which are said to infuse the novel depend precisely on a wider perspective of disengaged knowledge that is simply assumed to be superior to the fallible narrator, her attitudes and evaluations, and that contrasts her explicit expressions with the implicit meanings we derive. "As everyone knows," Raymond Himelick writes,

the main themes of Plath's novel are those of her own early life, specifically five months in the summer and fall of 1953, in her twenty-first year. Our awareness of the patently autobiographical elements and of her suicide ten years later presents a peril. One is tempted to indulge either in queasy sentimentalizing or, even worse, in amateur psychoanalysis of the printed page, a critical approach of dubious value but which The Bell Jar . . . certainly invite/s/. Taking the novel as a kind of locus classicus of contemporary assumptions and modes of response, however, the juxtaposition of new and old has at least the virtue of putting it in a different perspective.⁵¹

The "perspective" Himelick (who teaches Renaissance literature), employs in his article is to both compare and contrast in juxtaposition "certain aspects of twentieth-century sensibility" suggested by his reading of The Bell Jar with similar melancholic concerns in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy and with assumptions about individual and social roles in

Erasmus' Praise of Folly. The controlling image of Plath's novel, he writes, "however appealing to the present-day palate's taste for any catering of the existential absurd, actually raises more questions than it answers, questions about as old as civilized society itself and in one way or another, I think, centering upon the relation of what we call personal being or selfhood to that environment it finds itself in. Where do we find genuineness and authenticity? What can be dismissed as phony and illusory? Plath's bell jar image certifies no more than the authenticity of her own depression" (Himelick, 317). Himelick contrasts this with an older "venerable" and "commonplace" metaphor of life as a stage play:

In this older view questions about the Real Me, of poignant concern, apparently, to most of the young, can scarcely elicit any glib answers. If a kind of identity forms between the player and the part he takes, and if outer world merges with inner, then personal being is pretty much a neuter quality until the day-by-day tussle of playing its role in society shapes it up. . . . this is the only way open to us, not of finding meaning and significance in our lives so much as making it -- piecemeal and incomplete as it is bound to be. Today we look at an ineffectual life and say that the poor fellow never really found himself. In this older, less sanguine view, we would be blinking the probability that there was nothing necessarily there for him to find.

Now, all of this is quite at odds, it seems to me, with the current mystique of self. Here, if I understand it, the authenticity of personal being resides only in what Lionel Trilling has called "isolation." We conceive of it as a virtually autonomous entity, the repository of all that is natural, instinctual, non-rational (or even sub-), and therefore the source of everything charismatic and potent, which is to say, everything genuine and real. The Renaissance, of course, was well aware of the power of this visceral and subliminal part of our nature, but regarded it as more cause for alarm than self-congratulation. In this current assumption, it follows, everything that is natural, ergo authentic, exists in contradistinction to, and threatened by, the

artificial and repressive social formulations that hem us in Authenticity depends on the "isolation of self, which would else be suffocated by an absurd and alienated culture or system And I suspect the fact that Plath's book has spoken to a substantial body of educated readers means that in one way or another they share some such premises as I have outlined. (Himelick 323-324)

Although I do recognize this as the current mystique, the fact that the novel speaks to many of us is not to be explained away by a contrast with the supposed relative certainties of Renaissance sensibilities. Esther is in no position to be persuaded or supported by a Renaissance view as corrective for a damaged life; Himelick's contrast does not reduce uncertainties but multiplies them. Unfortunately for Esther and for us, Romanticism has intervened, and if this has provided us with new myths and metaphors, as Himelick indicates, these are not simply a question of historical or social environment, since as Himelick points out too, civilization itself is continuously implicated. The main difference from this older premise, for Himelick, is that in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, for example, "the movement is centrifugal, ranging out and away from the Me and Now of the author to list and examine causes, effects, and cures of melancholy, and to give examples and illustrations by the thousands," while the "notable contrast [with The Bell Jar] is in the handling of experience. In The Bell Jar the movement is always centripetal; every sight, sound, or taste of events zeroes in on Esther's consciousness in much the same way that snowflakes in the headlights of one's car seem to be aimed only at him. Focus is always upon self, the attrition inflicted by outer world upon the writhing inner world of Plath's persona, the steady object of brooding concern" (Himelick, 318).

Himelick's essay is often witty and generous-hearted without being sentimental in the way it addresses broad humanistic concerns that seem a long way from literary technical analysis. But are they, since despite all the tone of his defensiveness against the peril of awareness, and even with the protections of historical perspective and condescensions to the twentieth century, Himelick's own assumptions about sensibility, about structure, about the controlling image, about method, about characterization, about persona, are revealed in his response to the novel:

To read The Bell Jar is to be struck at once by the harsh, glaring immediacy of sensory experience. Images of cage, prison, torture chamber, blackness and sterile whiteness, slimy sea greenness, frozen immobility stucco the work and provide its chief structural means. A series of snapshots taken at high noon, one reviewer has called it. Or, to alter the metaphor a bit, it resembles a handful of pitiless slides stuck in the tray in what strikes us at first as almost random fashion. It is the associative method of the poet, relying on image and objective correlative rather than the discursive and conceptual. So we shuttle from one searing snapshot to another, either present encounters or memories from the past of Esther, the fictional persona of the author. (Himelick, 314-315)

What we know — about the autobiographical elements, about the sentimentalization of emotional response, about analytical association — informs our readings; the "self," the "system," and "the handling of experience" are all implicated together in the problem of whether the novel can provide any means to question precisely these "contemporary assumptions and modes of response." The question is not that "personal being is only a kind of misty abstraction . . . until . . . performance gives it substance"

(Himelick, 322), or of feeling and thinking and the relative meaning and significance we attribute to each, but of the ways in which we both find and make meaning. Himelick clearly does not like the "harsh", "glaring," "searing" focus he finds in the novel, but the significant meanings he finds in the novel are the connections Esther makes. The immediacy of her sensory experience gives the lie to our abstractions, the demonstration being that she is not the black hole of her own oblivion — the "nothing there" Himelick posits. The "nothing there" might be the biggest fear of us Romantics, and this is not a question of metaphor only, since the choices involved are a life and death matter, and not simply reflections on the nature of the self. Esther discovers her "self" in her experience.

This is not to suggest, as Himelick fears, that "even madness itself, since it represents the total alienation, can be invested with the halo of ultimate authenticity and liberation" (Himelick, 324), although Plath's novel might suggest this, and much of the criticism of the novel certainly assumes it. Marjorie Perloff, for example, derives her reading of the novel from R. D. Laing's secular version of divine madness, and gives the following example of the split between an "inner self [occupied in phantasy and observation'] and outer behaviour that characterizes the schizoid personality":

When Jay Cee, the Ladies Day editor, asks Esther, "What do you have in mind after you graduate?" Esther's inner self observes her own external response with strange detachment: "I don't really know," I heard myself say . . ." (Perloff, 508-509, Italics added by Perloff.)

Esther, who usually has her plans "on the tip of her tongue" feels "a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true."

It sounded true, and I recognized it, the way you recognize some nondescript person that's been hanging around your door for ages and then suddenly comes up and introduces himself as your real father and looks exactly like you, so you know he really is your father, and the person you thought all your life was your father is a sham. (35)

In voicing her sensation of truth for the first time here, Esther discovers and recognizes the deep congruency behind her superficial sham self, and the connections she makes are to what she knows and recognizes, not to what we know. The sensation of congruency challenges the schizoid model. The discovery is not only of herself, but of the felt truth of context, of the time of family romance, of the ambiguity inherent in a father who is both nondescript and incidental, yet who "looks exactly like you" and is all-pervasive, sham or otherwise, and of whom, above all, she is the child. Esther does not experience herself to live in her own time, but above all in the time of her father's sham image, and her recognition of the "truth" of the mediation here begins to define and control this ambivalence.

Against the rich field of this discovery stand the Rosenbergs, for instance, who are introduced in the opening sentence of the novel ("It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York") seemingly at face value; almost all readings of the novel extrapolate from that point a chronology of the events leading up to Esther's breakdown, hospitalization, and

recovery. But if the Rosenbergs are taken by the critics to reflect a certain constituted social reality informing the novel, the novel itself reflexively questions the ontological status of the Rosenbergs. Are they "objective realities?" Or the realities of subjective paranoia? For the Rosenbergs very clearly define a cultural fantasy -- the need for guilty victimization, for scapegoating and ritual purgation -- that is rooted in the need for symbols of everybody's imagination involved in complicity with the novel. But, in spite of the major terms of discussion of Esther as callous, self-pitying, and indifferent to those around her, it is Esther, and only Esther in the novel, whose perceptions can break through the normalized preconceptions of ideology and metaphor to perceive that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg might be real people, and it is only Esther who can sympathize with the Rosenbergs in terms of human feelings:

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.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

(1)

Esther's feeling response is passive, though not detached, and from that first paragraph her concern for the Rosenbergs becomes a touchstone for sympathetic human response. Esther asks Hilda, "Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?"

"Yes!" Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart.

But "in the tomblike morning gloom of the conference room" Hilda

"amplifie/s/ that Yes of hers"

"It's awful such people should be alive."

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, "I'm so glad they're going to die." (111)

Esther takes pains to characterize Hilda herself as deathly hollow, unfeeling, self-centered, artificial, and possessed by a dybbuk, but the point the novel makes here is not Esther's defensive rejection of Hilda as a response to the paranoid hate that she feels to exist in the world (for surely there are real persons who feel that the Rosenbergs were guilty and deserved their deaths, and perhaps there exist persons who feel that they did not suffer enough for their supposed crimes), but to vindicate Esther in her reaction to this, in assuming that we share her own liberal values, in opposition to the "they" who are everywhere — "they electrocuted the Rosenbergs." To persuade us that Hilda has no feelings is to beg the difficult question of understanding the feelings she might have, and hence in avoiding this, the connections the novel wants to make are away from the feelings of Esther's imagined experience, to the Rosenbergs as a shared social symbol of victimization. Esther herself soon learns what electrocution "would be like" for the victim, with no reference to the Rosenbergs, in her own experience of electro-shock therapy:

something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.

I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.
(161)

Esther's unregenerate questioning of the feelings of relationship between responsibility and victimization unmask the detachment that can legitimize and rationalize electro-shock treatments as "therapy," and indicate an awareness of the relationship of the suppression of feelings, of response, of articulation in the "corrective process" to the repressions of legitimate and justified requital. But the novel cannot explore this relationship and retreats into the metaphor Robert Scholes describes:

this personal life is delicately related to larger events — especially the execution of the Rosenbergs, whose impending death by electrocution is introduced in the stunning first paragraph of the book. Ironically, that same electrical power which destroys the Rosenbergs, restores Esther to life. It is shock therapy which finally lifts the bell jar and enables Esther to breathe freely once again. Passing through death she is reborn. (Scholes, 7)

Scholes' own ironic detachment from the felt realities of life and death metaphorizes Esther's emotional electrocution in shock treatment out of the terrible reality to which she is committed; his commitment to Esther's therapy encourages conformity and help Esther "adjust" to what in terms of her experience are the realities of a casual dehumanizing ethic and the exploitation of our need for victims and stereotyped roles.

Scholes' "therapy" offers "solutions" to Esther only if she can regain and maintain her place in a social system which the novel reveals as creating and exacerbating emotional suffering; however, Esther's own connections of electrocution and punishment as theme and image are from the social and symbolic to the sexual and private — they are involuntary memories, memories of the body which "surface" into consciousness:

I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. . . .

An old metal floor lamp surfaced in my mind. One of the few relics of my father's study, it was surmounted by a copper bell which held the light bulb, and from which a frayed, tiger-colored cord ran down the length of the metal stand to a socket in the wall.

One day I decided to move this lamp from the side of my mother's bed to my desk at the other end of the room. The cord would be long enough, so I didn't unplug it. I closed both hands around the lamp and the fuzzy cord and gripped them tight.

Then something leapt out of the lamp in a blue flash and shook me till my teeth rattled, and I tried to pull my hands off, but they were stuck, and I screamed, or a scream was torn from my throat, for I didn't recognize it, but heard it soar and quaver in the air like a violently disembodied spirit.

Then my hands jerked free, and I fell back onto my mother's bed. A small hole, blackened as if with pencil lead, pitted the center of my right palm.
(161-162)

The deeply buried connections are inscribed on her body. It is not necessary to be the amateur psychoanalyst Himelick postulates to follow up all Esther's connections in this passage to show that the need for intellectual and sexual independence, for emancipation from the constricting symbolic use of her father's relics, the need to get beyond the bounds of her mother's bed to her own desk and writing are mired in deep reserves of Oedipal guilt and hurt and the need for punishment. Esther's connections move from a disaffected ironic detachment inwards, backwards, downwards through guilt, anxiety, sexuality, to a debilitating empathy that affects her choices -- of career, of style, of self. Or are the choices in which Esther finds herself only a symbolic intellectual fable?

These deep currents of shock of recognition are not of disengaged irony at all, but precisely of the highly charged experience that always for Esther is associated with sexuality, for instance the "full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing gowns the color of skin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity" that Doreen wears. The shocks ripple through seductive sexuality into narcissism, and point toward the wished-for annulment:

As we sat back to back on our separate sides of the bed fumbling with our shoes in the horrid cheerful white light of the bed lamp, I sensed Constantin turn round. "Is your hair always like that?"

"Like what?"

He didn't answer but reached over and put his hand at the root of my hair and ran his fingers out slowly to the tip ends like a comb. A little electric shock flared through me and I sat quite still. Ever since I was small I loved feeling somebody comb my hair. It made me go all sleepy and peaceful. (94-95)

The annulment is not only of what Norman O. Brown calls the tyranny of the genitals, but of the ways in which that tyranny as it works itself out in the novel and our lives fosters and accommodates Marcos' rapist impulses, and Irwin's, and Esther's own inversions of this. "The headlong, appetitive, sluttish Doreen/'s]" (Himelick, 317) sticky sultriness everywhere threatens Esther's ideals and can be barely controlled by our own attitudes and ideals, pro and con, about sexuality let loose; but the currents of sexual electricity that reveal the quality of the way we live the world point toward another fuller and richer of living, point away from the counterfeit sexual desire "which in Esther always seems somehow more theoretical than real" (Himelick, 315). There can be no vivifying experience of sexual meaning or meaning of sexual experience because

life in the bell jar is the way the world appears to a body subtracted of meaningful experience; what Esther says several times she "could never really imagine" about sexuality (6, 247) is just what her "spy" reports lesbian couples (for instance) "actually do": "Milly was sitting on the chair and Theodora was lying on the bed, and Milly was stroking Theodora's hair" (247). Esther is "disappointed" because this is not a "revelation of specific evil." "I wondered if all women did with other woman was lie and hug." That the currents of sexual electricity for Esther herself are only static and prove to be impotent for fulfillment indicate that the locus of where it hurts is in the frustrations of the polymorphous body in a world not rich enough to satisfy her needs, or to transcend the limits of that word "all."

But if Esther is never able to achieve fulfillment in sexual independence, or sexual dependence either, her very spark of vulnerability in isolation and discontinuity indicates the culturally destructive and potentially individually therapeutic meanings of the concept of alienation. Esther tries to recover the realities of felt and painful experience in the face of the enervating displacement of affect, of Plath's narrative and interpretive controls. If Esther cannot recover vivid and revitalizing experience through the novel, what has happened to us? Aesthetic objectification effectively and more-or-less efficiently excludes empathetic experience; personal feelings, motives, intentions have no place for reflective discussion. The form we find is everywhere; quality is difficult to place. We ourselves cannot begin to think, feel, or act now except from the starting point of our own alienation; or as Himelick says, quoting Lionel Trilling on sincerity and authenticity, "Today there is

'no ready disposition to accept the idea that authenticity is exactly the product of the prescriptions of society and depends upon these prescriptions being kept in force'" (Himelick, 324). But if being alienated is a modern cliché, the feeling is no less real for that; to confess our own impotence in the face of values rejected by the vision of a more satisfying way of life is an extension of awareness into the sources of frightened victimization. The unexpressible quality of Esther's "irrational" neurotic anger is a first step in the liberating use of her anxieties as a tentative movement towards freedom and wholeness that works through and against the jargon of authenticity which is the glibly rationalized aesthetic coherence of Plath's metaphors:

The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of
silence. It was my own silence. (20)

In connection with his own musical experimentations with free indeterminacy, the composer John Cage asks "What happens to a piece of music when it is purposelessly made?"

What happens, for instance, to silence? That is, how does the mind's perception of it change? Formerly, silence was the time lapse between sounds, useful towards a variety of ends, among them that of tasteful arrangement, where by separating two sounds their differences or relationships might receive emphasis; or that of expressivity, where silences in a musical discourse might provide pause or punctuation; or again, that of architecture, where the introduction or interruption of silence might give definition either to a predetermined structure or to an organically developing one. Where none of these goals is present, silence becomes something else - not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical

intention) may be depended on to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them. He who entered an anechoic chamber, a room made as silent as technologically possible, has heard there two sounds, one high, one low -- the high the listener's nervous system in operation, the low his blood in circulation.⁵²

Cage may be only extending our preconceptions to take account of indeterminacy; Plath of course is not concerned with the technology of silence, or the random noises of the animate body, but precisely with the "arrangement" and "expressive" "emphasis" of Esther's silence as purposefully determined elaboration of her metaphor for what Lionel Trilling calls "isolation," as the fixed bell-jar pane of the window which here separates Esther from the noise of the cars and the people and the river in the city below indicates. But her very isolation within Plath's metaphor begins to release her and us from Plath's and our own intentions into the "something else" beyond the goals, into the sounds Esther does not hear in the silence; for, as Cage says, "There are, demonstrably, sounds to be heard, and forever, given ears to hear. Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do, that mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing each sound just as it is, not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception." But even if Cage's "just as it is" forever "isn't" for us, that is, if we can never have no preconceptions, her own silence is all that Esther has left to begin with and what she tries so desperately to get back to; the question the novel provokes is what we may hear in Esther's silence. What we may only hear, as Trilling and Himelick show, "more or less approximat[es] a preconception." When mass culture is at its loudest and most demanding "what is demanded of us is not that we be properly related to life, since we can hardly avoid that relationship

whatever it is, but that in becoming conscious and aware we adopt the proper attitude, the correct posture, the perfect gesture." ⁵³ If it sometimes seems to me that Sylvia Plath of The Bell Jar is ultimately not a great nor genuine artist precisely because of her inability to recover or create genuine and liberating experience without infusing experience with adopted socio-political postures and attitudes towards experience, this reflects my own demands that the novel negate the posturing, the attitude, the counterfeit gesture. Plath and the critics of her novel complement each other in effectively seeking to reduce Esther's life to a self-effacing objectivity disengaged from the deeply subjective and personal; for me this simply feels wrong - wrong to my own needs, to lived experience, to affective quality. If The Bell Jar never finally offers an emotionally satisfying grounding for me in what it would feel like to be fulfilled by the novel, still, I think it draws attention to what must be repressed (in the novel, in me) in order for this to be so - or to effectively continue to be so, since as Trilling and Himelick indicate, it is the repressions which are intuitive. Esther herself can only accept her past by equating imagination with experience; but what the reader has to do is imaginatively revalue certain experiential and behavioural states (ultimately the aesthetic experience of the novel) through a radical dissolution of conceptual frame-works and see them as more or less abortive or successful strategies to achieve autonomy and self-consistency. But whose autonomy is it that is in question, since my feeling that Esther's only chance for autonomy is in our aesthetic experience is behind my dissatisfactions with the constrictions both of the novel and our responses. Where is the life? To see Esther as an object in and of her world is not only to change

personalized character to a de-sensualized thing, but to cut off any personalized response. It is not only the painful protests of Esther which are then eliminated, but in a sense ourselves, as sensing, feeling, intending human beings. The presence of life in the novel is destroyed by theory long before Esther attempts the elimination in practice.

Pursuing her suicide Esther tries to "ambush" her body, and after a comic fiasco at hanging herself decides to drown:

I brought my hands to my breast, ducked my head, and dived, using my hands to push the water aside. The water pressed in on my eardrums and on my heart. I fanned myself down, but before I knew where I was, the water had spat me up into the sun, the world was sparkling all about me like blue and green and yellow semi-precious stones.

I dashed the water from my eyes.

I was panting, as after a strenuous exertion, but floating without effort.

I dived, and dived again, and each time popped up like a cork

I knew when I was beaten.

I turned back. (181)

But who is the "I" who is "beaten," who has the vision of the bejewelled richness of the world above water? The dictum of the novel would have it that imaginative embodiment in the senses does not complete and confirm existence, which is elsewhere, in the "self" or dis-embodied in cultural metaphor; but who then is the "my" which acts against the "I" of the "self"? And the question is not who has "my breast," "my head," "my hands," "my eardrums," "my heart," but who is the breast, head, hands, eardrums, and heart, which "surface" like the personal connections Esther makes. Esther's fully reified body carries objectification to its extreme, and taken in context, the criticism of the novel, too, acts to foreclose the universe of possible discourse and closely defines the terms in which the novel can be

discussed. But if the quality of imaginative relatedness Lawrence addresses is a potential source of knowledge, imagination itself becomes dangerous to civic virtues and highly subversive because the social meanings of nothing and negation in the novel indicate radical new forms of life and experience in an awareness of the sacrifices which we have to suffer because of the refusal of these values, a sacrifice which the novel affirms as necessary, which the novel represents and recognizes as valid, but which nonetheless remains a sacrifice and our limitation. In this respect, artistic experience is, as Jerald Zaslove points out, "an unmasking and a negation in bitter conflict with all those repressive and inhibiting experiences whose nature is never really known until artistic creation disturbs the surfaces of assent" (Zaslove, 5-6). If what we hear in the sound of Esther's silence is the recognition that we are not free -- culturally, socially, psychologically, emotionally -- to shape ourselves, what we hear in the "old brag" of her heart, "I am, I am, I am," confronting oblivious isolateness in her own anechoic chamber, is the corollary that personal life is not in the metaphors of isolate self, but is in the body and only there. Though, as Himelick points out, even the "viscera" can be idealized, criticism of The Bell Jar remains anaesthetized to what the novel reveals about itself. In the faint fremitus of the anaesthetized body we feel the signs of a life still protesting, and in the ability to feel this is our own life.

Having said all this, I am not sure that I have said clearly what I want to say, or even that it can be said clearly anymore: that the constant readings of the novel in terms of ironic dissociation, and new and effective forms of the cultural approbation of the protesting voice, reflects and parallels the sensibility that controls and defines and limits Esther's

responses, and that Esther's attempts to recover vivid and revitalizing experience for herself is within and against just this ironic and approving sensibility. Perhaps I can do no more than assert that there is more quality, depth and intensity to Esther's life (and by implication my life) than the novel (and world) will allow; that the qualitative distinctions between what the world-and-novel won't allow, and the possibilities for potential genuine experience in moments of personal truth rooted in a vital response and the immediacy of felt needs which obliterate this negation, cannot be in ironic dissociation. This is a tautology in which we are caught. The protesting view is voiced by the inarticulate body in empathetic identification with the imaginative embodiment of the senses; criticism of the novel is vitally implicated in this since the metaphors of the self which the criticism extrapolates and extends from the novel are, and have to be, in conflict with an engagement so embodied in affective experience that the very identification and clarification of critical concerns requires intense personal commitments. Even though I can't always make those commitments in this essay myself, I have argued this throughout, and tried to show how the novel both will and will not support the argument -- that is, how the counterfeit novel defines, limits, and controls the genuine experiences we can only find in our own making. Alienation is not localized in milieu or in the novel, but permeates the connections between Esther and the world of the novel, connections which go through and beyond Esther's own perceptions and our own biased presuppositions to a new awareness of ourselves and the world we live in. What we are left with finally is perhaps not the novel, which may be almost killed, or was maybe even born dead, according to our responses and the relative costs to each of

us of keeping it safely buried or reviving it with the breath of life. Somewhere in what might be an essentially saprophytic relationship there is organic life, and Esther's "deadness" is more life-like to me than some of her readers, who seem to be "at pains to hid their life-likeness";⁵⁴ in making us realize, as Lawrence pointed out, what is dead and what is alive in ourselves and our world, the deep recognition leaves us with those of our responses towards the vitalizing of life which the novel provokes.

List of Notes

¹ D.H. Lawrence, "The Novel" in Phoenix II: Uncollected Writings, edited by Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking Press, 1970), page 420.

² see for example Mary Kinzie's annotations on the first reviews in her "An Informal Check List of Criticism," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, edited by Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pages 287-288; more reviews are listed in my bibliography.

³ the posited distinction between counterfeit art which insulates from experience and genuine art which illuminates experience is from Wayne Burns, "The Genuine and Counterfeit: A Study in Victorian and Modern Fiction," in College English, volume 18 (1956), pages 143-150.

⁴ D. H. Lawrence, "John Galsworthy" in Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence, edited by Edward D. McDonald (1936; reissued 1968; New York: Viking Press, 1972), page 539.

⁵ John Dewey, "Context and Thought," in On Experience, Nature, and Freedom, edited by Richard J. Bernstein (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), page 100.

⁶ Lawrence, "John Galsworthy," page 539.

⁷ Sylvia Plath, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), quotation from inside of dust jacket.

⁸ Hugh Kenner, "Sincerity Kills," in Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, edited by Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), page 34.

⁹ Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," in Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), page 293: subsequent references to this edition of the novel will appear in the text. The remark was apparently made to A. Alvarez; see A. Alvarez, "Prologue: Sylvia Plath," in The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1971; New York: Random House, 1972; reprinted New York: Bantam Books, 1973), page 20.

¹⁰ see M.L. Rosenthal, "Poets of the Dangerous Way," in The Spectator, volume 214 number 7134 (19 March 1965), page 367 and "Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, pages 69-76;

Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

11 see for example Mary Kinzie's annotations on the first reviews in her "An Informal Check List of Criticism," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, pages 287-288; Cameron Northouse and Thomas P. Walsh also give an annotated bibliography of reviews in their Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1974).

12 The Observer Weekend Review, number 8955 (17 February 1963), page 23.

13 Lois Ames, "A Biographical Note," page 279.

14 Guy Davenport, "Novels in Braille," in National Review, volume 23 (18 May 1971), page 538.

15 Elizabeth Hardwick, "On Sylvia Plath," in The New York Review of Books, volume 17 number 2 (12 August 1971), page 3.

16 Saul Maloff, "Waiting for the Voice to Crack," in New Republic, volume 164 number 19 (8 May 1971), page 33.

17 J. D. O'Hara, "An American Dream Girl," in Washington Post Book World, (11 April 1971), page 3.

18 see for example, G. W.'s review of The Bell Jar in Newsweek, volume 77 (19 April 1971), page 120; Saul Maloff, "Waiting For the Voice to Crack," pages 33-35; Guy Davenport, "Novels in Braille," page 538; T. O'Hara, review of The Bell Jar, in Best Sellers, volume 31 (1 June 1971), pages 123-124; Martha Duffy, "Lady Lazarus," in Time, volume 97 (21 June 1971), pages 87-88; Howard Moss, "Dying: An Introduction," in The New Yorker, volume 47 (10 July 1971), pages 73-75.

19 "Sylvia Plath," in The Poet Speaks, edited by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pages 169-170.

20 The Poet Speaks, page 170.

21 A. Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, page 65.

22 Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic" [1960] in Reason and Revolution (1941; second edition, New York: Humanities Press, 1954; reprinted Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), page viii.

23 Irving Howe, "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent," in Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work, edited by Edward Butscher (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977), page 235; Elizabeth Hardwick, "On Sylvia Plath," page 3.

- 24 David Holbrook, Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence (London: Athlone Press, 1976), page 281.
- 25 Alvarez, The Savage God, page 35.
- 26 Andrew Brink, "Sylvia Plath and the Art of Redemption," in Alphabet, number 15 (December 1968), pages 48-49.
- 27 Charles Newman, "Introduction" to The Art of Sylvia Plath, page 17.
- 28 Teresa de Lauretis, "Rebirth in The Bell Jar," in Women's Studies, volume 3 (1976), page 182.
- 29 Michael Richard, "One Man's Revolt," in Canadian Woman's Studies, volume 1 number 1 (Fall 1978), pages 13-14.
- 30 Marjorie Perloff, "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice': Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar," in Contemporary Literature, volume 13 number 4 (Autumn 1972), pages 511-512. Perloff's footnote is "When asked in an interview what she held the function of poetry at the present time to be (1962), Sylvia Plath responded: 'Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure-not its influence as religious or political propaganda.'" (Perloff, page 511).
- 31 "Plath is not a feminist writer because she does not commit herself to ideological issues in her work." Jon Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation page 7: see pages 4-10, passim.
- 32 Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition (New York: Octagon Books, 1978 /copyright 1976/, page 3.
- 33 Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (1961; reprinted Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), pages 86-87.
- 34 Phoebe Adams, review of The Bell Jar, in Atlantic Monthly, volume 227 (May 1971), page 114.
- 35 Robert Scholes, "Esther Came Back Like a Retreaded Tire," in New York Times Book Review, volume 7 (11 April 1971), page 7.
- 36 Mary Ellmann, "The Bell Jar -- An American Girlhood," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, page 225.
- 37 A. R. Jones, "On Daddy," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, page 230.
- 38 Gayle Whittier, "The divided woman and generic doubleness in The Bell Jar," in Women's Studies, volume 3 (1976), page 129.

39 Stan Smith, "Attitudes Counterfeiting Life: The Irony of Artifice in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar," in Critical Quarterly, volume 17 number 3 (Autumn 1975), page 247.

40 see Teresa de Lauretis, "Rebirth in The Bell Jar," in Women's Studies, Volume 3 (1976), pages 173-183; Tony Tanner, "Interior Spaciousness -- Car, Bell Jar, Tunnel and House," in Tanner's City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pages 262-264; Gordon Lameyer, "The Double in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar," in Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work, edited by Edward Butscher, pages 143-165; Caroline King Barnard, Sylvia Plath (Boston: Twayne, 1978), pages 28-33.

41 "Prochronism. The general truth that organisms carry, in their forms, evidences of their past growth." Gregory Bateson, Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), pages 229-230.

42 T. O'Hara, page 123. See also Perloff and Holbrook.

43 Maloff, page 33; Barnard, page 31; Holbrook, pages 104-105; Perloff, page 521.

44 Alfred Kazin, Bright Book of Life (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973 [1971], pages 184-185.

45 see, for example, Smith, page 259: "If her rebuff in part accounts for Joan's eventual suicide, it is not something for which Esther can take responsibility."

46 Jerald Zaslove, "Counterfeit and the Use of Literature," in West Coast Review, volume 3 number 3 (Winter 1969), page 19.

47 Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," page 66.

48 quoted in Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," page 295.

49 David Cooper, The Death of the Family (New York: Random House, 1970), page 7.

50 Ernest G. Schachtel, Metamorphosis (New York: Basic Books, 1959), page 284.

51 Raymond Himelick, "Notes on the Care and Feeding of Nightmares: Burton, Erasmus, and Sylvia Plath," in Western Humanities Review, volume 28 number 4 (Autumn 1974), page 314.

52 John Cage, Silence, (Wesleyan University Press, 1961; Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), pages 22-23.

53 James Flynn, "Celine: Beyond the Gesture," in Recovering Literature, volume 2 number 1 (Spring 1973), page 4.

54 Wayne Burns, "On Reading Novels: An Outline for a Contextualist Primer, in "Recovering Literature, volume 10 (1982), page 36.

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