Chapter 2

THE OTHER

The other is indeed what is not inventible and it is then
the only invention in the world, the only invention of the
world, our invention, the invention that invents us. For
the other is always another origin of the word and we are
(always) (still) to be invented.

Jacques Derrida: Psyche and the Invention of the Other

What does invention do? It finds something for the first time. And this finding
becomes a novelty, an invention, when the experience of finding takes place as
it has never happened before. 'An event without precedent whose novelty may
be either that of the (invented) thing found (for the example, a technical
apparatus that did not exist before: printing, a vaccine, nuclear weapons, a
musical form, an institution...or else the act and not the object of finding or
discovering, for example, in a now dated sense, the Invention of the Cross –
by Saint Helena\(^2\), Whichever may be the case, from both these points of view,
Invention 'does not create an existence or a word as a set of existents, it does
not have the theological meaning of a veritable creation of existence ex
nihilio.'\(^3\) Rather 'it unveils what is already found there...only put(s) together,
starting with a stock of existing and available elements, in given
configuration.'\(^4\)
It is in this sense of taking stock of existing and available elements that this chapter wishes to make an inventory of the 'other' as it has appeared in European thought. Plath's poems bear testimony to the notion that the 'other' is 'our invention' and also 'the invention that invents us'. It is an anomalous category which is always configured and always yet to be defined.

**Locating the Self**

Since there is no *real* Sylvia Plath, it is impossible to arrive at a real explanation on a single true reading of her work. Post-structuralism has shown that there are as many versions of a text as there are readers reading it. According to Paula Bennet\(^5\) in Plath we find a conflict between 'the needs of her genre and the requirements of her gender.' This close, explicit and murderous relationship is a result of Plath's struggle to be confidently creative while seeking acceptance within a patriarchal society. Virtually all the poems Plath wrote in 1961 suggest the same sense of isolation, frustration and internal division, as ‘In Plaster’:

> At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality–
> She lay in bed with me like a dead body
> And I was scared, because she was shaped
> Just the way I was

*(‘In Plaster’, 18\(^{th}\) March, 1961)\(^6\)*
The social schizophrenia thrust upon women is a result of the dominant subjectivity, which is totally blind to the ‘other’. The woman-poet on the other hand is exiled to self-alienation because she must forever vacillate between two categories, where ‘to choose’ would mean self-annihilation. The sense of exile is a result of the poignant awareness of the world from which she has been banished:

You checked the diet charts and took me to play
With the boa constrictor in the Fellows' Garden.
I pretended I was the Tree of Knowledge.
I entered your bible, I boarded your ark

(‘Zoo Keeper's Wife’, 14th February, 1961)

She can not participate in the male amnesia for the ‘other’. Though in exile, she continuously seeks entry into the male world through language. The woman is forced into isolation by her choice of vocation. The very titles of some of her poems reflect this loneliness: ‘The Zoo Keeper's Wife’, ‘Face-lift’, ‘Barren Woman’, ‘Insomniac’, ‘I am Vertical’. Thus she is inconsolable in her situation:

I used to think we might make a go of it together.
After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
Now I see it must be one or the other of us

(‘In Plaster’, 18th March, 1961)
Heterosexual marriage too becomes a metaphor for an uncomfortable participation in an already existing system defined by patriarchal limits. Sexuality is a subversive category where existing value systems can be challenged – where oppression can be reduced to a tool for pleasure. This complex participation is a form of negotiation rather than escape. It only enhances the sense of alienation. Plath's poems often convey a sense of physical vulnerability and ironic self rejection. For example, in ‘Cut’ laceration is considered as the essential condition of a woman:

How you jump –
Trepanned veteran
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump

('Cut', 24th October, 1962)

This seems almost a reiteration of the Freudian postulate of female 'jealousy' of the male penis. The woman stifled by her own body is a recurrent image in Plath's poems. This sense of suffocation is transferred to the undeniable presence of material objects. Agnes in ‘The Wishing Box’ can not use imagination as an escape from her material reality. The flowers in ‘Tulips’ have 'sudden tongues' and 'eat my oxygen'. This self compulsory participation in an alien world does not allow a purely subjective domain. The self becomes a mere cog in the wheel. Thus in ‘Totem’, the world is ‘blood-hot and personal’, ‘Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit.’
It is important to note that pleasure and persecution are inseparable in many of Plath's poems thus denying the possibility of knowledge as power. The 'thrill' of a decapitated thumb in 'Cut' can be traced back to the 'dark guilt' of ‘The Pursuit’ (1956):

Appalled by secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance
Entering the tower of my fears,
I shut my doors on that dark guilt,
I bolt the door, each door I bolt.

('The Pursuit', 1956)\textsuperscript{11}

There is a sense of guilty participation even in the idea of victimization. The drama of social/political life played out on a nightmarishly larger scale gives rise to the holocaust imagery in poems such as ‘Daddy’, ‘Hiroshima Ash’ ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Fever 103’ which is the subject of much controversy:

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

('Fever 103\textsuperscript{0}, 20\textsuperscript{th} October, 1962)\textsuperscript{12}

Joyce Carol Oates objects to Plath’s 'snatching her metaphors for her predicament from newspaper headlines'; Seamus Heaney argues that in poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’, Plath harnesses the wider cultural reference to a 'vehemently self-justifying purpose'; Irving Howe describes the link as
'monstrous utterly disproportionate'; and Marjorie Perloff describes Plath's reference to the Nazis as 'empty' and 'histrionic'. There exists an objection to Plath's tendency to represent the self through fantasy which involves a kind of personal myth-making. However as Jacqueline Rose points out there is 'no fantasy without protest'. Instead of considering an essential selfhood Plath engages herself in forays of self-representation. Unlike popular opinion Plath does not always subscribe to the position of the isolated poet. The influence of women's magazine in her prose work has been used to analyze images, but this could also be used to question the favouring of high culture Modernism. This elitism is more easily associated with poetry. The holocaust being a metaphor that belongs to the collective unconscious can not be tampered with. The personal can not be political in a world that connives with male values.

Though critics like Alan Sinfield have identified political awareness in Plath, her poetry actually calls for a redefinition of the term 'political'. The self in Sylvia is a representation of both the personal and political often challenging such demarcation. The process again is in a constant state of flux and refuses to succumb to any kind of fixity.

According to Jacqueline Rose, being a victim (aggressor) does stop one identifying with the aggressor (victim) She is talking particularly about the relationship of language and fantasy in the functioning of memory of holocaust victims. The same argument can be extended to gender dynamics in a heterosexual matrix. There is an over determination of roles played out:

Every woman adores a Fascist
The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you,

(‘Daddy’, 12th October, 1962)\textsuperscript{15}

While her letters and journals do reveal that the male gaze plays a central role in determining her self-image, many of her poems deal with a deep suspicion of engineered gender-roles irrespective of sex. In ‘The Disquieting Muses’ she prefers to be inspired by the three faceless women rather than the nursery rhymes and childhood stories of her own mother. Rather than accept prevailing fairy-tales, she prefers to use resonances of already existing myths to create her private fantasy. Toni Saldívar emphasizes upon Plath's attempts to create a fictive self: 'I see a conflict of modes of imagination in Plath's poetry, and not a “battle of sexes” as Sandra Gilbert called Plath's internalized war.'\textsuperscript{16} Imagination like representation does not however exclude the politics of gender.

In locating the self in Sylvia Plath, critics have sometimes privileged 'immanence'; and at other times 'transcendence'; The first celebrates fragmentation and the disintegration of the body and sexual identity and the second attempts to retrieve a coherent and consistent ‘I’. According to Jacqueline Rose there is a strange proximity between the two positions. They situate the women inside an exclusively personal struggle to express either the self or non-self and both seem attached to the same valorization of high culture, whether in its coherent 'realist' or fragmented 'modernist' mode.
The first position of 'immanence' does not allow the women to emerge out of a marginalized position. It does identify Plath as opening up the field of female subjectivity to furious female anger with its potential for transforming social relations between oppressor and victim. For example, Lady Lazarus, as vindictive sorceress, seizes the stage, transgresses the codes that have enslaved her. However as Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement suggest '...the role of sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, anti-establishment and conservative, at the same time.'\textsuperscript{17} Both, in their way, mark the end of a type. Self-expression for women is thus denigrated to the underside of language and she is allowed no time in the historical process.

The second position often emphasizes a resurrection of the self through family relationships instead of concentrating on the traumatized self. It neglects the victimized daughter to focus upon the transformation of the self through motherhood. Gubar and Gilbert go so far as to say: ‘[B]y choosing to celebrate maternity…Plath virtually initiated what has become a significant genre for the mid and late century women whom we call ‘mother poets’.\textsuperscript{18} Motherhood in Plath's poetry is imbued with a loathing for patriarchally thrust roles and letters to her own mother were not exactly a communication of trust. This duality is especially exposed during the period of her illness when she had to be sent to a clinic and also during her traumatic separation with Hughes in later years. This notion is reiterated through Esther Greenwood's reluctance to meet her mother who is righteously compassionate and understanding during her period of mental illness. There is a clear rejection of the valorized concept of motherhood. Another fall-out of the celebration of motherhood
would result in an increased emphasis of the female body based on menstruation, pregnancy and birth: 'The blood-jet is poetry./There is no stopping it’. (‘Kindness’, 1963). This is not necessarily a statement of triumph. It could be interpreted as helplessness, a lack of control over an existing condition which generates anomalies. In fact, the following line suggests a predetermined role: 'You hand me two roses'. Thus in Plath these images too are not free from a sense of uneasiness or even self-loathing. They often reveal a person who has not yet come to terms with her own body. The 'viciousness in the kitchen' of ‘Lesbos’ is contradicted by the serene nostalgia of ‘The Babysitters’, the ‘Strumpet's Song’ by the ‘Spinster’, ‘The Heavy Women’ by ‘Barren Woman’ and ‘Childless Woman’.

With increase in artistic control there emerges a vision of purification and perfection equivalent to the perfection of art. This resurrection of the self is further problematised by a fear of isolation which exists simultaneously with a sense of alienation from any kind of group-identity. In ‘Ariel’ she lets her body 'flake' away, annihilate the 'trash' of flesh because it makes her kind to ‘the peanut-crunching crowd.’ She transforms herself from gross mother to 'pure acetylene virgin', rising towards heaven or to dew evaporating in the sunrise; but transcendence means death. When self-inflicted, there is a suggestion of triumph:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else,

I do it exceptionally well.
Yet she fears and scorns death's perfection as well as life's imperfections – 'perfection is terrible, it can not have children' (‘Munich Mannequins’, 1963). Self-annihilation is nevertheless the ultimate artistic, ironic response to humiliation.

She imagines one further form that allows both immanence and transcendence – the veiled and jade-like woman in ‘Purdah’ who says of her bridegroom 'I am his' and proceeds to envisage herself as the tigeress who will kill him. The daughter in 'Daddy' who lives passively 'like a foot' adores the boot in the face and allows her pretty red heart to be bitten in two. Finally she accomplishes the ritual murder of the father whom she both loves and hates. In the Plath scheme, then, transcendence alone can not be a solution – it merely means joining the killers instead of the killed.

Having made this initial movement to sketch the location of the self, we return to the inventory. We wish to begin with Descartes and Cartesian dualism as the inaugural moment of the 'other' in modern thought. We would then survey how the 'other' takes shape in the thoughts of Freud, Levinas, Kristeva, Bakhtin, Althusser, Said and Spivak. Some of these thinkers shall be considered in pairs, as they have either worked and engaged with each other in a direct, attributable manner, for example Levinas and Derrida on Freud and Lacan, or been influenced as is the case for Freud and Kristeva. We shall also

(‘Lady Lazarus’, 23rd -29th October, 1962)
take stock of Adorno and Gabriel Marcel and the insights they offer regarding the 'other' in the fields of aesthetics, culture and society.

In the *Discourse on Method* we have the dream of the pure description of the word based on the indubitability of the pure thinking ‘I’. This 'I' is conceived not as an unmediated, solipsistic, unique, bodiless subject created wholly from within itself in thought but as an entity introduced, presented and ultimately invented by the 'other' which is exteriority, the objective world guaranteed by God. Thus *res congitans* and *res extensa* are mimetic models of the self and the ‘other’. The historically important outcome of this argument was the positing of a word constituted of two different sorts of entity. Arriving at the cogito it is possible to think away from conception of the self as everything except this very awareness of the conscious self. And this conscious aware self is validated by the 'other', the external word given by God on whom one can rely. This leads straight to a view of the word as constituted by subject which is pure thought and object which is pure extension. The famous Cartesian dualism, the bifurcation of mind and matter, observer and observed, subject and object is the earliest historical model of the self and the ‘other’ in philosophic thought.

The Cartesian paradigm of the self looked at by the 'other' the observer and observed locked in a relation of symmetry, neutral and objective, finds a distinct expression in the paintings of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century. Before the Dutch masters, painters in the Italian Renaissance committed themselves to the mimetic activity of selecting,
organizing and idealizing into the depth of things. The Dutch painters did not experience the world of images as a conception according to which the creation of images in painting is equivalent to the optical generation of images in the eye: the 'I' that neutrally perceives the 'other'. With the Dutch painters the images assume the position of the eye, as a true mirror of the external world.

Svetlana Alpers has an interesting answer for the curious necessity of Dutch painting to replicate 'pure seeing'. The answer lies in a consideration of the contemporary scientific theory of vision based on the Cartesian premise of seeing subject and the seen object, the neutral objectivity of the self and 'other' epitomized in the optical instruments of the time, especially lenses, magnifying glasses, microscopes and telescopes. In *Paralipomena*(1604), Kepler gives a description and analysis of the way things are seen, images are formed which is also a clear formulation of the Cartesian description of the self and the 'other'; vision is brought about by a picture of the things seen being formed on the concrete surface of the retina.\(^\text{21}\) Seeing becomes an act of production involving the self and 'other'; what is seen is a replication of what is produced.

A meditation that began with Descartes finds most comprehensive articulation in the philosopher who thought of himself as the culmination of Cartesianism: Edmund Husserl. Especially in his *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl has much to say on the self-other relation and the inter-subjective dimension of phenomenological enquiry. Husserl's *Cartesian Meditation* \(^\text{22}\)
were initially lectures delivered at Sorbonne in 1929. Husserl responds to the charge that phenomenology is solipsism (from the Latin 'solus ipse') wherein the self has no knowledge or interest in the 'other'. Self-contained like a Liebnizian monad without encountering or experiencing anything other than itself, the charge states that Husserlian phenomenology has no frame work to accommodate the other human being which makes inter-subjective compassion, sympathy, pity, respect and responsibility quite impossible.

A response to this charge is in the Fifth of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* under the topic ‘Uncovering the Sphere of Transcendental Being as Monadological Subjectivity'. Husserl states that the world as it exists for the self is the self's world. However, the self encounters another ‘animate organization’ over there, separate from the self. The self sees that this object 'over there' exhibits similar physical traits as the self, and so the self decides that this 'other' is in some way like the self. Husserl's term for this occurrence is ‘analogue’; the 'other' is an analogue or a mirroring of the self. This analogical 'apperception' is what Husserl coins 'appresentation'. The alter-ego (other person) is made co-present to my ego. Husserl states that without this 'other' the self can not precisely and adequately know itself, nor can it learn that the world is larger than its experience of it. Eventually Husserl asserts, 'I experience the world ... as an inter-subjective world, and this objective, inter-subjective world is ‘experienceable by everyone’. Thus Husserlian phenomenology marks the 'other' as the alter-ego, another human individual existing out there and separate from the private ego-consciousness. This means that the 'other' is separate and related and a ‘modification of myself’.
Moving from the consciousness of the transcendental ego to the acceptance of 'other' egos Husserl states that we move from the restricted world of one to a more comprehensive community of inter-connected individuals. In a double gesture of separation and assimilation Husserl brings the 'other' to the self and also expands it for the constitution of humanity. A slightly extended quotation from Husserl:

the possibility of acts of the Ego that reach into the other Ego through the medium of appresentive experience of someone else and, indeed, the possibility of specifically personal acts of the Ego that have the character of acts of mine directed to you, the character of social act, by means of which all human personal communication is established.  

We may conclude with Husserl's very powerful declaration made in Section 62 of the Meditation; 'In my self I experience and know the other; in me he becomes constituted.'

Against this Husserlian phenomenological ethics of the self and the 'other' in which the 'other' is the alter-ego of the self and constituted by it to make possible inter-subjective communication, Emmanuel Levinas one time student of Husserl, raises some fundamental reservations. In Totality and Infinity (1969) Levinas takes issue not only with Husserl but also with
Heidegger whose lectures he attended in Freiburg. Levinas is concerned that Western philosophy has been pre-occupied with Being, the totality, at the expense of what is otherwise than being, what lies outside the totality of Being as transcendent, exterior, infinite, alterior, the ‘other’. Distinguishing between ethics and ontology Levinas asserts the primacy of ethics as something preceding ontology where the encounter with the ‘other’ can not be reduced to a symmetrical relationship, something, he contends, Husserl has done. According to Levinas the Husserlian formulation of the self and its 'other' rather than self and the other does not respect the 'other' as ‘the other’, irreconcilable in its otherness, but enfolds and encloses it as the ‘same’, and Levinasian 'ethics' is a calling into question of the ‘same’:

A calling into question of the same – which can not occur within the egotistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other, ethics. The strangeness of the other as his irreducibility to the same, to my thought and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity as ethics. \(^\text{25}\)

A page later Levinas is more clear in his critique of Western philosophy as it has consistently enclosed and assimilated the other in its ontological fold: ‘Western philosophy has most often been an ontology, a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of middle and neutral terms.
that ensure the comprehension of Being’. Thus according to Levinas, philosophy as ontology is narcissistic and power-loving by incorporating the ‘other’ into the ‘same’. Philosophy in this sense is an egology whenever it neutralizes the thrust of the ‘other’ as alter ego, the ‘same’, the mutually constituting and overdetermined. To preserve the ‘other’ for Levinas is to not let it become an object of knowledge or experience within the totality of an egology. As Levinas writes elsewhere: ‘If the other Other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the Other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all ‘synonyms of power’.26

It would be beneficial at this point to read Levinas along with his most incisive co-reader commentator and critic, Jacques Derrida. In ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas’, Derrida states that his effort would be ‘in the style of commentary remaining faithful to the themes and audacities of thought –and this despite several parenthesis and notes which will enclose our perplexity.’27 Thus we will trace Levinas with the counter-trace of Derrida in a text (‘Violence and Metaphysics’) where the commentator-critic Derrida's encounter with the ‘other’ of the Levinas text enacts the tense relation between the absolute 'other' and the always already 'same'.

Introducing the metaphor of the face, the encounter with the face, face-to-face with the 'other' in Levinas’ thought, Derrida faithfully notes, 'face-to-face without intermediary' and without 'communion'. Thus Derrida elucidates, without intermediary and without communion, neither mediate nor immediate,
such is the truth of our relationship to the other, the truth to which the traditional logos is forever inhospitable. This unthinkable truth of living experience, to which Levinas returns ceaselessly, can not possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked...without intermediary or without communion, absolute proximity and absolute distance. Hence Derrida explains Levinas intends a:

Community of non-presence, therefore of non-phenomenality. Not a community without light, but a community anterior to Platonic light. Only the other, the totally other, can be manifested as what it is before the shared truth with a certain non-manifestation and a certain absence. Not pure and simple absence, for there logic could make its claim, but certain absence. Such a formulation shows clearly that within this experience of the other the logical non-contradiction that is everything which Levinas designates as "formal logic" is contested in its root. This root would be not only the root of our language, but the root of all Western philosophy, particularly phenomenology and ontology.
Derrida records Levinas’s argument that the consistent refusal of Western philosophy to think the 'other' has had two consequences. ‘(A) Because they do not think the other, they do not have time. Without time, they do not have history. The absolute alterity of each instant, without which there would be no time, can not produced – constituted – within the identity of the subject or the existent. It comes into time through the other. (B) More seriously , to renounce the other ( not by being weaned from it, but by detaching oneself from it, which is actually to be in relation to it, to respect it while nevertheless overlooking it, that is, while knowing it, identifying it, assimilating it), to renounce the other is to enclose oneself within solitude (the bad solitude of solidity and self identity) and to repress ethical transcendence.’

To continue the train of Levinas’s thought the incapability of respecting the meaning of the other, renders phenomenology and ontology as philosophies of violence. And hand in hand the entire philosophical tradition would make common cause with oppression. One should remember the ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession.

Let us put together Levinas’s complex argument about the ‘other’ using metaphors of light and face in a simple form and then move on to Derrida's critique of him. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas puts forward the idea of the ethical relation as something that brings us face-to-face with absolute alterity. This alterity has nothing in common with us. Thus for Levinas ethics precedes and invalidates the entire project of epistemology which is nothing other than egoity. Tracing this egoological violence in the
entire Western philosophies tradition starting from Plato to Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas stresses the need to lay ourselves open to the ethical encounter.

Derrida picks on the always already implication of metaphor in language and the always already implication of language in constituting and thinking of the other, to raise serious misgiving about the absolute alterity of the Levinasian other. Derrida writes:

It has always been believed that metaphors exculpate, lift the weight of things and acts. If there is no history except through language, and if language (except when it names Being itself or nothing: almost never) is elementally metaphorical, Borges is correct: “Perhaps universal history is but the history of several metaphor.” Light is only one example of these several fundamental metaphors but what an example! Who will ever dominate it, who will ever pronounce its meaning without first being pronounced by it? What language will ever escape it? How, for example will the meta-physics of the face as the epiphany of the other free itself of light?[^30]
Derrida offers an intricate and devastating critique of this position. Derrida makes the valid point that the relation to the other *can not but* take place through some mediating reference to the self's own experience, physical embodiment, perceptual modalities and way of being-in-the-world, all of which is implicated in a language which is not language without rhetoric. Derrida further points out that Levinas by founding ethics on the idea of ‘absolute alterity’, is in danger of denying those elementary ties of reciprocal trust and mutual obligation. In contrast Levinas raises 'otherness' to a high point of abstract principle which thereby excludes any possible appeal to modes of inter-subjective understanding. Derrida asserts that despite the Levinasian assault on Greek thought for its metaphysics of violence it (Greek thought ) ‘recognized from its second word (for example in *The Sophist*) that alterity had to circulate at the origin of meaning.’

**Subject Positioning and Subjectivity**

Turning to Sylvia Plath we find that the subjective 'I' in poetry presents the problem of representing the self in terms of a language which always already exists. Since the self is always yet to be constructed, this subjective 'I' is almost accidental and subject to continual fluctuation. Assimilating the 'gendered I' is a political agenda or campaign that seeks to convert the observed into the observer. Such an ethical resistance against being included in the same ontological fold seems almost impossible. The positioning of the subject remains suspended at the margin of this debate and is finally reduced to an epistemological exercise:
From her lips ampersands and signs
Exit like kisses.
It is Monday in her mind: morals
Launder and present themselves.
What am I to make of these contradictions?
I wear white cuffs, I bow.

(‘An Appearance’, 4th April, 1962) \(^{31}\)

The transition 'her' to 'I' only makes the contradictions more apparent to the subject but does not resolve them. Absolute alterity can only induce silence which transcends the 'I-You' relationship – a silence that can be referred to in the third person:

The woman is perfected
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment

(‘Edge’, 5th February, 1963) \(^{32}\)

On analyzing the above representation, it appears that the ‘gendered I’ is between two different formulations of the other. (1) The Cartesian concept of the 'other' as an extension of the self which is essentially male. This involves the mechanical adjustment of the female subject in a world created by male values (2) Absolute and perfect alterity, which in itself is a violence for it entails the absolute annihilation of the self. The second voice in the 'Three Women' says:
I did not look. But still the face was there,
The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,
The face of the dead one that could only perfect
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.

(‘Three Women’, March 1962)\(^{33}\)

Here the face of perfection is not an extension of one's own sensory perception. It belongs to another order. To achieve total integrity of a subject, one needs to close the eyes and shut out the empirical reality. This in itself is violence:

Between myself and myself
of scratch like a cat
The blood that runs is dark fruit
An effect, a cosmetic.

(‘The Other’, 2\(^{nd}\) July, 1962)\(^{34}\)

According to Judith Butler there is only one gender – for it is the woman who has been the eternal ‘other’ in the male bastion. Thus for the woman subject it is almost impossible to segregate the self from the ‘other’. Any attempt to do so results in violence. In Plath’s poetry we find a continuous tussle with her subjectivity which often results in violent imagery. The subjective ‘I’ seems to be both victim and observer of this unavoidable violence:

That is that. That is that
You peer from the door,
Sad hag. ‘Every woman’s a whore
I can’t communicate’.

(‘Lesbos’, 18th October, 1962)\(^35\)

It seems that the woman is destined to be an incoherent subject. Absolute alterity is impossible in always/already language. The thought of Being always opens in difference and is never free of a certain violence:

I wish him dead or away
That it seems, is the impossibility.
That being free. What would the dark
Do without fever to eat?
What would the light
Do without eyes to knife, what would he
Do, do, do without me?

(‘The Jailer’, 17th October, 1962)\(^36\)

Here the female subject seems to be eternally trapped in her own objectivity. Initially she tries to reduce 'him' to an object which turns out to be an abortive attempt. The 'I' of the poem instead of constructing the male object as the ‘other’ succumbs and turns upon her own self.

According to Levinas non-violent language would be free of predicate, the verb 'to be' – a position that Derrida challenges. For a women
writer destined to inhabit a language system which is a male construct, to omit the predicate is akin to suicide. Yet to share a language with predicate makes it impossible for her to be an autonomous subject:

Chinese yellow on appalling objects –
Black asininity. Decay
Possession
It is they who own me
Neither cruel nor indifferent

(‘Wintering’, 9th October, 1962) 37

Modernism came with the agenda of fragmented objectivity which for the male subject provides the ideal camouflage of being non-committal. If we analyze the above stanza, the first lines provide a perfect example of sentences without predicate. They provide certain anonymity to the writer until we reach the word 'Possessions '. It is they who own me. The presence of the female subject is felt only when she identifies herself as an object. Such a use of language is indeed 'Neither cruel nor indifferent'. It is simply unavoidable.

Between the self and the 'other', the subject and object, there is always the mediation of language which manipulates the power structure. Pure non-violence is also violence – violence to one's position as a subject. However, abortive and incomplete, the subject is willing to be a part of this
violence. The birth of this illegitimate subject is the precondition to writing as a woman:

‘Do away with it altogether’

'No, no, it is happy there.'

'But it wants to get out!

Look, look! It is wanting to crawl'.

(‘A Secret’, 10th October, 1962)38

Modes of inter-subjective understanding which go beyond the identity of the self to make fully immanent the non-identity of the other are also proposed by Theodor Adorno in works such as Negative Dialectics and Minima Moralia. For Adorno, the self-constituting I, bent on control and self-assertion, removes itself from the fulfilment of true inter-subjective community. Adorno invokes the Cartesian differentiation between a self-sufficient res cogitans and an opposing res extensa, a distinction that implies abstraction from the physicality of thought. It makes it possible to identify a res cogitans that is identical with itself and independent of the other: only a total difference is able to create total identity. Adorno diagnoses this subject/object split in Cartesian dualism as the cause for the consequent hardening, objectification and technocratization of the self in Western history. The subject, which constitutes itself through its domination over a nature that it has rendered objective, itself becomes an object. Adorno contends that the strict separation between subject and object, the split between mind and body, intuition and concept, the overcoming of a mimetic relation to enter an inner nature and to the other, all
lead to isolation and intensification of the processes of abstraction and
objectification. To bridge this gap between inner and other, the subject must
order the multitude of impressions and sensory data: ‘The subject creates the
world outside himself from the traces which it leaves in his senses: the unity of
the thing in its manifold characteristics and states.’ At the center of the
process stands a reference to the ‘other’, who is not be incorporated but rather
approximated. Thus Adorno identifies fellow feeling, compassion, sympathy
and love toward other people as the imitation, assimilation and surrender to
the ‘other’. Adorno epitomizes the relation between the self and the ‘other’ as
the duplication of the individuality of the ‘other’, and of mirroring. The point
is now to allow the ‘other’ the possibility of seeing himself or herself, now to
see oneself in the mirror of the ‘other’. The important point to note is that
Adorno does not wish to neutralize and incorporate the ‘other’ in the synthesis
of a Hegelian dialectics. Rather he opts for the risk of a negative dialectics of
non-identity thinking in which the ‘other’ in its alterity offers a frame for
transcending the self. The non-identity of the ‘other’ makes it possible to have
experience that leads to a self-illumination without the self.

Can the ‘unstable’ subject be a position of advantage? The rigid and
stable ‘I’ is in constant danger of dissolving into an object. The female subject
can not adopt the rigid separation between the ‘abstract self’ and the ‘physical
other’. In doing so, it would only imitate the male position and end up being
assimilated into the always already language system:

I am his
Even in his
Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles

(‘Purdah’, 29th October, 1962)\(^{40}\)

As discussed earlier in this section, a language without predicate
robs the female subject of its political agenda. Yet, the self-assertive 'I' only
serves to echo a masculine sense of identity. Plath's poems seem to experiment
with all these possible positions resulting in a rhetoric of violence without
direction. This is most evident in her apparently confident ‘angry poems’. In
‘Daddy’ the poetic voice may seem triumphant but the 'I' in Daddy is an
eternal victim:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe

(‘Daddy’, 12th October, 1962)\(^{41}\)

The female speaker in the poem in trying to isolate the male ‘other’, reduces
herself to an inert object. The ease of accusation against patriarchal
domination, turns upon itself and the woman ends up being both the victim
and the accused:
I thought every German was you
And the language obscene
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.

(‘Daddy’, 12th October, 1962) 42

Here the accused is clearly identified as the dominant male figure which again is an abstraction that transcends the particular role of the father and husband. At the end of the poem she writes, ‘If I have killed one man I have killed two.’ Signifying a series of defeats the speaker just says, ‘I am finally through.’ The justice meted out is not at the initiative of the speaker. ‘They’ who carry out the punishment that echoes a bacchic frenzy are just anonymous villagers. The poem is depersonalized and the subject finds a mythical refuge:

They are dancing and stamping on you
They always knew it was you

(‘Daddy’, 12th October, 1962) 43

As far as the individual subject is concerned, it fails to segregate itself from the accused ‘other’ and begins to admit its guilt:

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

(Daddy, 12th October, 1962)

As long as the other has an 'identity' there remains a danger of falling into positivism that clearly isolates the self, which in turn dwindles into an object. The moment the other loses its specific identity the self is released from its role as a victim. This leads to self-illumination without the self. In a reading prepared for BBC Radio, Plath said of this poem: ‘here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter two strains marry and paralyze each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it’. October 1962, when this poem was written was also the month when she and her husband separated. Is the relationship of the self and the subject an allegorical one? Do the self and the subject constitute two parallel narratives that never meet? Or is it an inter-subjective communion?

In her analysis of the poem, ‘Daddy’ and its conditions, Jacqueline Rose makes the following assertions. (1) The poem presents ‘a crisis of language and identity’ caused by a process in which ‘identity and language lose themselves in the place of the father whose absence gives him unlimited powers.’ (2) The crisis of language and identity is registered in the text especially in two instances. On the lines ‘Ich, ich, ich / I could hardly speak’, Rose comments that ‘The notorious difficulty of the first person pronoun in relation to identity – its status as shifter, the division or splitting of
the subject which it both carries and denies – is merely compounded by its repetition here.’ She notes that ‘In the poem the I moves backwards and forwards between German and English.’ She refers this to ‘the dispersal of identity to language.’

In passing we shall consider two other thinkers on this topic: Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber. Marcel's thought is anti-Cartesian because it insists that philosophy begins with ‘We are’ rather than ‘I think’, with co-esse rather than esse, with intentional consciousness towards the other, rather than self consciousness, with inter-subjectivity rather than subjectivity. Nothing makes clearer Marcel's central vision than the line from his play: Les Couerés des Autres: 'there is only one suffering – to be alone.' Because inter-subjectivity is the precondition of human consciousness, and communion the mode of authentic life, Marcel can characterize philosophy as a series of meditation on the meaning of 'with' – the self with the ‘other’ instead of self and the ‘other’. This accommodation of the other is organized in one of the central categories of Marcel's – disposibilité, the idea of availability. To be available is to be so uncluttered by a sense of one's self and its sameness, so unthreatened by the strangeness of the ‘other’, that one may enter into communion with it.

The idea of communion involved with the ‘other’ is also the central theme of Martin Buber's much acclaimed and influential book I and Thou published in 1923. To objectify the other, Buber thinks, is to treat him in a I-Thou relationship. In the I-Thou relationship, the self and the ‘other’ are present to each other in an attitude of openness and self giving. To be with the
‘other’ means that the I and the Thou cease to be isolated entities communicating by signs across an uninhabited no-man's land. Thus I - Thou relationships pass over from dialectics to dialogue and the I becomes I in the fullest sense, only when it encounters a Thou as the ‘other’.

Plath's poems have often being accused of being too autobiographical by critics who subscribe to the Modernist paradigm of objectivity. The relation between the poet and the poem is not based upon a binary split between subject and object and self and other. It is a creative process that involves conscious connection. The relationship of the poet to the poem seems to reiterate the situation of the female subject who is treated like an object in a patriarchal system. Any attempt to estimate the women-writer requires a revaluation of the entire relationship between the artist and the work of art, the creation and the creator. There is a tendency on our part to prioritize between the writer and written in terms of chronology and thus fall into the trap of subject-object binary. We tend to treat poetry as a symptom and writing as a therapy thus relegating them constantly to a secondary role. It is as if the poem is a result of something, the effect of a cause that exists outside itself. A theory which treats the poem as an object actually excludes the subject. The relationship between the art and the artist and self and the ‘other’ is not one of displacement or incorporation but of approximation. It indicates a free exchange and is a process which leaves stresses and achieves unity through multiplicity. Thus mutually contradictory positions of the subject contribute to a sense of artistic unity when we regard poetry as an event and the self to be constantly defined by the other.
In Plath's poems, the other is sometimes male which in free exchange with the self often makes it 'masculine'. At times the subject of the poem loathes her own masculinity and at other times falls a victim to it. Sometimes the subject finds refuge under the umbrella of womanhood and is momentarily secure but soon this notion of a common feminity fades like an illusion. The subject rebels against any such permanent incorporation:

It is Adam's side
This earth I rise from, and I in agony.
I can not undo myself, and the train is steaming.

(‘GettingThere’, 6th November, 1962) 48

Before there is free exchange between the self and the ‘other’, the subject has to retrieve itself from its socially relegated position of eternal otherhood:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it’s a poultice.
You have an eye, its an image.
My boy, its your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it.

(‘The Applicant’, 11th October, 1962) 49

Here the subject regards itself as third person neuter gender. This gives way to participation through community feeling where the subject is
happy to position itself as one among many. There is a sense of security derived from a common cause:

The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,
The blunt clumsy stumblers, the boors.
Winter is for women –

(‘Wintering’, 9th October, 1962)

Then again, the subject rejects any sort of group identity:

I stand in a column
Of winged unmiraculous women
Honey-Drudgers.
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.

(‘Stings’, 6th October, 1962)

In *The Bell-Jar*, Plath refers to her experience in the clinic after her mental breakdown. Since then, the process of assimilation into normalcy had required constant and conscious effort. The ‘Bell-Jar’ is a metaphor that indicates a barrier between the individual and world around her. At times she
revels in this difference catering to the modernist myth of individuality. But as a woman, trying to make her voice felt in the world of poetry, it became difficult to work out a common theoretical position with other women writers. Much as she admired Virginia Woolf and Marianne Moore, this did not lead to any confident sense of identity. We have to only compare her poems to that of her contemporary, Adrienne Rich, to note the difference:

You, woman masculine
In single – mindedness
For whom the word was more
Than a symptom –

A condition of being
Till the air buzzing with spoiled language
Sway in your ears
Of Perjury.\(^5\)

We note that female subject is fixed and focused and has a direction as far as an adversary is concerned. This subject constitutes itself by displacing ‘the other’. The subject position is not anomalous but quite well-defined. The problem lies in finding the correct impression for her in a male-regulated language.
The issue of women’s writing in a restrictive system of signs will be discussed in the next chapter. For the time being, let us focus ourselves on a unique feature of Plath’s poem, where the self and the subject are constantly changing their stance. They vacillate from being foes to allies and even co-conspirator. The subject position being unfixed and subject to change, often turns upon its own self and the resultant violence is more an implosion than an explosion.

Feminism has dealt at length with a new form of language, its ramifications and possibilities. Linguistic paradigms have been questioned and changed. However, as long as the hegemony of a coherent, essential subject continues, poetry is bound to turn into a monologue and fall into the masculine trap of the dominating voice. Before we move on to language, women must question the relevance of a fixed and united subject.

It is my contention that the problematized and traumatized subject which fluctuates and contradicts itself is the strength of Plath’s poetry. It does not use language to conceal its contradiction but makes possible the evolution of a new poetics. This subject is not predetermined but always yet-to-be.

The bees found him out,
Molding on to his lips like lies,
Complicating his features.

The thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.

Is she dead, is she sleeping?

(‘Stings’, 6th October, 1962)\textsuperscript{53}

To rebel against existing male paradigms, and yet maintain individuality was a tremendous task given the available theoretical tools at that time. It is the contention of this thesis that the unstable subject in Plath’s poems is an asset which makes possible a constant re-invention of the self through language. The self refuses to calcify and maintains its strangeness through a free exchange with the ‘other’. Thus, a fear of the ‘other’ is replaced by a re-discovery of the self. The strict division between ‘I’ and ‘You’ is blurred. Even if the relation is antagonistic, the result is a poetry of exchange:

I see your cute décor

Close on you like the fist of a baby

Or an anemone, that sea

Sweetheart, that kleptomaniac.

I am still raw.

I say I may be back.

You know what lies are for.

Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet.

(‘Lesbos’, 18\textsuperscript{th} October, 1962)\textsuperscript{54}
All throughout this poem the subjective and objective positions are in a state of flux: two parallel reactions are recorded upon the same situation giving rise to a ‘Viciousness in the kitchen’. The bland dismissive apathy of the statement ‘A dog picked up your doggy husband. He went on…’, is contradicted by the ironic fervour of ‘I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair’. Ultimately it is impossible for these two subjective positions to merge into a unified sense of selfhood:

We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,
Me and you…

(Lesbos, 18\textsuperscript{th} October, 1962)\textsuperscript{55}

In a letter to her mother, dated October, 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1954, she talks about her majoring thesis at Smith College:

I am taking \textit{The Double} and \textit{Ivan Karamozov} (Smerdyakore and Devil) in \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} as cases in point and think I shall categorize the type of ‘double’ minutely contrasting and comparing the literary treatment as it corresponds to the intention of psychological presentation. In conjunction with this, I have been reading stories about doubles, twins, mirror images and shadow reflections.\textsuperscript{56}
Another thinker whose thoughts on the relation between the self and the ‘other’ has had particular influence not in the area of philosophy but in the more heterogeneous field of literary theory is Mikhail Bakhtin. Dialogism brings in the concept of the ‘other’ as a radical necessity to negotiate texts not only in literary critical practice but also facilitating inter and intra-culturalism in the social sphere. In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *Otherness*. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary, in dialogism consciousness is otherness. The self for Bakhtin is dialogic, a relation. The self (the perceiver) and the ‘other’ (the perceived) exist not as separate entities, but as ‘relations between two co-ordinates… Each serving to differentiate the other’.

The co-ordinates proposed by Bakhtin for modeling this simultaneity are the two sets of time/space categories inherent in each of its poles: self and the ‘other’ (Bakhtin speaks of them as two interacting legal codes). The ‘other’ is in the realm of completedness, where the self experiences time as open and always as yet incomplete. For all its comparative openness, indeed because of it, the self can not do what the ‘other’ can. Seeing requires a certain outsideness to what is seen. As Bakhtin writes: ‘In the realm of culture, *outsideness* is the most powerful factor of understanding’.

Bakhtin has an interesting just-so story to illustrate the relation between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ taken from Greek mythology. Bakhtin points that the ‘I’ is very much like the single eye of the fates: the three old women all pass around the same organ, if they did not share their ‘eye’ they could not see. In order to have her own vision, each must use the means by which the others see. For, in order to see ourselves, we must,
take the vision of others. Related in its crudest version, this is the self got from
the ‘other’. The self can forge itself only from the outside, in other words, the
self forges itself only with the ‘other’. 59

This relation between the self and the other is extended by Bakhtin to
a consideration of language. For Bakhtin, language is fundamentally dialogic,
inflected with the ‘other’: the other of language. Between any word and its
object, between any word and its speaking subject, between any word and its
active respondents, Bakhtin argues, there exists, ‘an elastic environment of
other alien words about the same object’. And this ‘dialogically agitated and
tension filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents’
weaves in and out of discourse in complex pattern. Language as constituting
and constituted by the ‘other’ is made most clear by Bakthin in the following
excerpt from Discourse in the Novel:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing,
as heteroglot opinion, language for the
individual consciousness lies on the border-
line between oneself and the other. The word
in language is half some one else’s. It
becomes one’s own only when the speaker
populates it with his own intention, his own
accent, when he appropriates the word,
adapting it to his own semantic and expressive
intention. Prior to this moment of
appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language…but rather its exists in other people’s mouth, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions…Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated, overpopulated – with the intention of others.50

The possibility of developing a poetics for/of women by negotiating with an always already existing language will be discussed at length in the following chapter. To summarize the discussion on female subjectivity, it is necessary to repeat with reference to the first chapter that Modernist poetry as propounded by dominant figures like Pound and Eliot laid emphasis on objective imagism. Women poets struggled to find their own voice according to established standards of judgement. Speaking about ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ in a BBC Radio Broadcast, Plath said:

I do not like to think of all the things familiar, useful and worthy things, I have never put into a poem. I did, once, put a yew tree in. And that yew tree began with outstanding egotism, to manage and order the whole offer. It was not a yew tree by a Church on a road, past a house in a town where a woman lived … and so on, as it might have been in a novel. Oh no. It stood
squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the Churchyard, the Clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated It – everything! I could not subdue it. And, in the end, my poem was a poem about a yew-tree. The yew tree was just too proud to be a passing black mark in a novel.

(‘Notes’, 1962,)^61

In this particular poem, ‘the moon’ is female. She fluctuates from being an ‘O-gape of complete despair’ to being the poet’s mother and is finally reduced to being ‘bald and wild’. The moon is discussed at length in the poem and only one line is dedicated to the phallic structure of the yew tree – ‘The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.’ Yet it dominates the poem and the speaker’s subjective imagination. The poem ends with the ominous statement – ‘And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence.’^62

In ‘Tulips’ the subject, as a patient has achieved an enviable state of ‘negative capability’:

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted
to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free.

(‘Tulips’, 18th March, 1961)^63
The poet is not looking for the exactitude of symbols and images which bring with it several attachments. She was not looking for any coherence:

No body wanted me before, now I am watched.

...........................................

And I see my self, flat, ridiculous, a cut – paper shadow.
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

(‘Tulips’, 18th March, 1961)⁶⁴

The tulips seem to reduce the female subject into an object. In ‘The Wishing-Box’, Agnes’s inability to share her husband Harold’s imaginativity, chains her forever to material objects and thus suffocates her. The vivid presence of tulips destroys the fluid inconsistencies of the subject:

‘They concentrate my attention, that was happy
playing and resting without committing itself.’

(‘Tulips’, 18th March, 1961)⁶⁵

In a world dominated by health, the poet prefers the sanctuary of white walls where sickness becomes an opportunity to shed all baggage. Similarly, the female subject searches for alternative modes of expression within a poetics contaminated with patriarchal value.
The Strategic Subject

Now to turn to the second part of the survey where we shall consider the ‘other’ as it has been thought in the fields of psychoanalysis, race and gender. We have to begin with Freud, though he does not use the term ‘other’ to designate the concept. A set of related thoughts is available to us in his essay The Uncanny (1919). Freud begins his discussion with the characteristics of the word ‘Uncanny’. The German word ‘Unheimlich’ (Unhomelike, uncanny) turns out to share a meaning with its apparent opposite. ‘Heimlich’ (Home, familiar) can also mean ‘concealed, secret, and thus the opposite of familiar and open. Freud writes, ‘The German word Unheimlich is obviously the opposite of heimlich, heimisch, [native] – the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is uncanny is frightening precisely because it is not known and unfamiliar’. A little later Freud again stresses the separateness and convergence of the two words, ‘Thus heimilich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite unheimlich’. We can relate this conceptually to what we have so far understood of the self (homely, familiar, identity) and the ‘other’ (strange, unhome-like, non-identity). If one remember definitions of self and the ‘other’ as outlined in mirror-like, analogous ways, another strand of Freud’s thought in this essay becomes useful for us. While talking of Hoffman and his novel The Devil’s Elixir, Freud introduces the concept of the ‘double’.

According to Freud the phenomena of the double is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else so that he is in no doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. Freud cites Otto Rank’s influential study, Der Doppelganger (‘The Double’) in which he connects the double with reflections in the mirror and the shadow. Freud theorizes that the
'double' as psychological phenomena appears in the stage of primary narcissism, which receives fresh meaning from the later stages of the ego's development. A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing the self... the fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object, that is, that man is capable of self observation... The double is thus the inscribed other within the self capable of censorship and observation.

Keeping Freud in mind let us turn to Sylvia Plath. Poems like, ‘The Ravaged Face’, ‘Mirror’, ‘Face-Lift’, ‘You're’, ‘The Other’, ‘Death and Co’, ‘In Plaster’, reflect this drama and tension between the 'heimlich' and the 'unheimlich'. The journey from 'My self, my self! – of obscene, lugubrious' to 'O Oedipus, O Christ, You use me ill', is remarkable. For the gendered 'other' the familiar is rendered unfamiliar by a dominant heterosexual matrix. Otherwise the entry into the symbolic for women need not be marked by rejection, separation or suppression. For women this split is not ontic but epistemologically imposed. The double which is the inscribed other within the self, capable of censorship and observation, thus becomes a comment on the nature of the inscription itself. The observer and the observed reach an ontological dead-lock:

Now she's done for, the dew-lapped lady
I watch settle line by line, in my mirror –
Old sock-face, sogged on a dancing egg.
They have trapped her in some laboratory jar.

(‘Face lift’, 15th February, 1961) 

Ironically enough, the word ‘heimlich’ which is both adjective and adverb, is used in several senses. The meaning ranges from ‘familiar’, ‘intimate’, ‘unnerved’, to ‘secret’, ‘obscene’, ‘allegorical’, ‘inaccessible to knowledge’. Thus ‘heimlich’ is a word that develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite ‘unheimlich’. ‘Unheimlich’ in some way or other is a sub-species of ‘heimlich’.

Between myself and myself

I scratch like a cat.

(‘The Other’, 2nd July, 1962)

The loathing that one has for the ‘other’ perhaps compels it to reject it as a necessary strategy of forming the identity, however tenuous, of the self. This rejection or abjection of the ‘other’ is constitutive of one’s ego formation and subjectivity, argues Julia Kristeva in her book Power of Horror (1980). The psychical phenomenon of abjection holds a central role in Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity. As a process, expelling what is deemed ‘other’ to one’s self, is a means for defining the borders of subjectivity. Kristeva describes the process of abjection as one by which an infant emerges from the undifferentiated union which it has with its mother and its surroundings, that is the act of separating itself, the self, from the other, in order to develop borders between the ‘I’ and the ‘other’. The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost
violently, excluding from one self: sour milk, excrement, even a mother’s engulfing embrace. Kristeva’s examples are graphic:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection….Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ do not want to assimilate it. ‘I’ expel it. But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself.⁷²

For women the establishment of this identity is even more complicated. Her entry into the symbolic is not actually marked by a rejection of the unfamiliar or metaphysics of violence. The division between the self and the ‘other’ is a cosmetic one imposed by partriarchy. In order to bridge this gap, one needs to question the validity of a metaphysics based on binaries. The binaries of subject/object, self/other, observer/observed must be dissolved in a last enactment of violence – a violence of rhetoric. It is a performance that lays open the politics of culture and languages. This conscious and dialogic enactment exposes violence without indulging in it, by maintaining an ironic distance. For example admiration for the ‘Spinster’ gives way to derision for the ‘Childless Women’ and shifts to desolation in the ‘Barren Women’. The serenity of ‘Heavy Women’ is replaced by an aversion to domesticity in ‘Lesbos’.
This founding of the self based on the radical exclusivity of the ‘other’, its abjection and expulsion creates rigid boundaries for the self which have to be constantly patrolled. Criticizing Kristeva on this count, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) writes:

> The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness. As Iris Young has suggested in her use of Kristeva to understand sexism, homophobia and racism, the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality and/or colour is an ‘expulsion’ followed by ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identity along sex/race/sexuality axes and differentiation. Youngs’ appropriation of Kristeva shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate ‘identities’ founded on the instituting of the ‘other’ or a set of ‘others’ through exclusion and domination.”

What Butler contends here is the thought that abjection and the definition of the self through the expulsion and repulsion for the ‘other’ may create problems for the gendered identity, particularly in the field of sexual practice
and choice. Instead of patrolling and vigilance along the border lines of the self and the ‘other’, which permits mutual exclusivity and then prompts phobia, one would do better to strive for a certain porosity, a permeability that would mean troubling both halves of the binary, self and the ‘other’. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler is critical of Simon de Beauvoir, whose construction of Woman as the ‘other’ to the masculine self, she finds existential and transcendental in spirit. ‘I read Beauvoir, who explained that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men…’ According to Beauvoir, the radical dependency of the masculinist subject on the female ‘other’ suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory. Butler goes on to argue that power operates as a determining constituent in production of thinking about gender binaries. She questions the internal stability of the terms ‘subject’ and ‘other’ and the possible power matrix that holds it together, wondering whether it may be the matrix of heterosexuality. Butler wants to bring both the halves of the binary to a frisson, a position where each half troubles the other.

Thus Butler’s renegotiation of the self and the ‘other’ calls for a loosening of categories, a relaxation of our fixation on identity. Power uses identity to configure us, and normative (gendered, heterosexual) identity calls for homogeneity too difficult to live. She believes that feminism has been compromised by its attempt to find an identity that would designate something common to everyone in the movement. Thus, though within feminism, Butler is against ‘identity politics’ (the self appropriating the ‘other’ as the same on the plane of compulsive heterosexuality), that sees political groupings and
beliefs as grounded in a shared identity, whether ethnic, racial, sexual, national or economic. All forms of identity politics, she believes, are prone to aggressions used to enforce rigid consistencies.

The incisiveness of Plath’s poetry is not directed at a fixed other. By questioning the very possibility of a unified subject, and problematising it, she resists the trap of homogeneity which reiterates masculine principal. By refusing to suppress the contradictions in the idea of selfhood, she succeeds in scoring over any pretence of forced unity upon violence.

An ideal example would be the Three Women where three voices are presented in unison without any attempt to reconcile their subjective differences. This poem ironically exposes the politics of a patriarchally conditioned society without any attempt to create a single unified point of resistance. This is more in line with Gayatri Spivak’s formulation of a strategic essentialism. Each of the three voices remain situated in their perspective without any attempt at displacement. This creates a dialectics of non-violence that undercuts the suave violence of an ordered regime. The voices do not merge and hence accept the multiplicity of truth / narratives:

A woman bends over me
Searching my reaches for what she really is
Then she turns on those liars, the candles of the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

(‘Mirror’, 23rd October, 1961)
Here there is no abjection but a porosity or permeability, without the fear of replacement. Any external or accepted source of illumination is resolutely denied. The possibility of complete truth is rejected for a partial view. As long as that view is reproduced *faithfully*, the woman-poet can be a subject without succumbing to existing paradigms of subjectivity.

Equally rigorous, though in a more politically inflected way, is Gayatri Spivak’s critique of identity politics, particularly the identity politics of the West, of males, and the elite bourgeoisie. Her restless critiques connect directly to her ethical position for a ‘politics of the open end’ in which deconstruction acts as a ‘safeguard’ against the repression or exclusion of ‘alterities’ – that is people, events and ideas that are radically ‘other’ to the dominant worldview. In her most well-known essay, ‘Can The Subaltern Speak’, Spivak explores the possibility of the deprivileged ‘other’ (in the colonial and gender frame) speaking back to the self as the center of power which inaugurates and constitutes discourse. Spivak poses the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent contribution of the ‘other’ as the self’s shadow. Feminists and post-colonial critics want to give the silenced ‘other’ a voice. But Spivak warns that the ‘other’ should not be assimilated as a homogeneous and unitary formation as that would be falling back upon the category of essentialism. Critiquing both ‘essential’ and ‘difference’ feminism, Spivak makes a landmark contribution in the conceptualization of the self and ‘other’ by her category of ‘strategic essentialism’ which is a more open-ended and politically pragmatic negotiation of the self and ‘other’ where difference
and essentialism, the rigid matrices of the self and the ‘other’ take on the attributes of porosity and interpermeability.\textsuperscript{76}

We conclude this survey on the ‘other’ by the wide-ranging ad comprehensive configuring of woman as the ‘other’, silenced or distributed across the polarities of good or evil (angel or monster) in literary representations. For the female writer the essential process of self definition, the founding of subjectivity is always already written over by patriarchal definitions. As Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ tells, ‘Herr Doktor’ and ‘Herr Enemy’, ‘I am your opus’, ‘I am your valuable’. Christina Rossetti in \textit{A Woman’s Poem} (1859) says as much, ‘You (men) make the worlds wherein you move … Our world (alas, you make that too!)’. A crucial passage from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s \textit{Aurora Leigh} suggests both the mystifying deathlessness and the mysterious variety female artists perceive in male imagery of women. The young Aurora broods on the iconography of the portrait of her mother (which, incidentally, was made after her death). Her child’s impression of her mother’s ‘Swan-like supernatural white life’ seemed to mingle with ‘whatever I last read, or heard, or dreamed’ and thus her mother’s image became, ‘…By turns / Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite.’\textsuperscript{77}

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner, in her influential essay ‘Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture’ notes that in every society, the psychic mode associated with woman seems to stand at both the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating. Explaining in this dual configuration of
“ghost, fiend”, and “angel, fairy”, Ortner says ‘both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddess, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice) … can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture’s testimony’. As a woman is denied the autonomy – the subjectivity – in writing, she is not only excluded from culture, but also becomes the forms of enigmatic and implacable otherness which culture negotiates with worship or fear, love or loathing. The patriarchal constitution of the feminine ‘other’ is either as the inspiring otherness of the spirit or the damming otherness of the flesh.

Sandra Gilbert an Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic make a comprehensive list instancing all such cases of repressive ‘otherness’ for woman, an exhaustive list which starts with the apocryphal figure of Lillith and ends in modern literary texts. Thus Gubar and Gilbert say:

Descending from the Patristic misogynists like, Tertullian and St. Augustine through Renaissance and Restoration literature – through Sidney’s Cecropia, Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth and his Goneril and Regan, Milton’s Sin – the female monster pullulates the works of the satirists of the eighteenth century, a company of male artist whose virulent visions must have been particularly alarming to feminine readers in an age when women had just begun to attempt the pen.
In all these incarnations of otherness – from Error to Dullness, from Goneril and Regan to Chloe and Caelia – of the female monster, what Gubar and Gilbert assert, is a striking illustration of Simon de Beauvoir’s theses that woman has been made to represent all of man’s ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death. As the ‘other’, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed.

With a nod towards Simon de Beauvoir's influential formulation ‘One is not born a woman’, the difficult task of formulating the subjectivity of woman as the revisionary and essential ‘other’ or the porous and permeable traffic between the self and the ‘other’, lies ahead. In one case, seeing Woman as the tranhistorical and eternal other leads to the ecriture feminine of Helene Cixous; the postulates of ‘difference feminism' which deconstructs the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other' as never a pure relation of alterity but always already implicated in the textual and cultural weave of identity politics, goes towards troubling the issue of gender in the mode of Judith Butler. The entire oeuvre of conceptualizing the 'other' for the dominating male thinkers (Derrida, Levinas, Adorno, Husserl, Bakhtin and Freud) can only be strategically used to posit a feminist poetics which would be genuinely oppositional, non-violent, asymmetrical and non-appropriative.

With a sense of ending and a new beginning we can quote Shari Benstock:
'Neither the biologically determined categories “male” and “female” nor the socially determined categories of “masculine” and “feminine” are absolute, entirely consistent, even monolithic with themselves. Each inhabits and is inhabited by its opposite. Here one discovers the difference within gender, within the experience of gender, here an alternative reading to woman's pre-determined plot offers itself.'
NOTES TO CHAPTER 2


2. Ibid., p. 117.

3. Ibid., p.115.

4. Ibid.


7. Ibid., p. 155.

8. Ibid., pp. 154, 155, 157, 162, 163.


10. Ibid., p. 236.

11. Ibid., p. 23.

12. Ibid., p. 231.


23. Ibid., p. 45.

24. Ibid.


28. Ibid., p. 112.

29. Ibid., p. 113.

30. Ibid., p. 114.

32. Ibid., p. 272.

33. Ibid., p. 178.


35. Ibid., p. 229.

36. Ibid., p. 227.

37. Ibid., p. 218.

38. Ibid., p. 220.


41. Ibid., p. 222.

42. Ibid., p. 223.

43. Ibid., p. 224.

44. Ibid., p. 223.


49. Ibid., p. 222.

50. Ibid., p. 219.

51. Ibid., p. 214.


54. Ibid., pp. 229, 230.

55. Ibid., p. 228.


58. Ibid., p. 80.


60. Ibid., pp. 68-80.


62. Ibid., p. 173.

63. Ibid., p. 161.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.


69. Ibid., p. 156.


74. Ibid., p. 36.


