CHAPTER THREE
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I: A Paranoid Nation: Women and the Policy of Containment

As part of a “personal odyssey” tour of American college campuses during the mid-fifties, Liberal candidate, Adlai Stevenson, gave a commencement speech at Smith College, Mass, where the young Sylvia Plath was attending. In A Closer Look at Ariel, Nancy Steiner recalls Stevenson’s speech and its effect on her:

Our unanimous vocation . . . was to be wives and mothers – thoughtful, discriminating wives and mothers who would use what we had learned in government and history and sociology courses to influence our husbands and children in the direction of rationality . . . The speech was eloquent and impressive and we loved it even if it seemed to hurl us back to the satellite role we had escaped for four years – second-class citizens in a man’s world where our only possible achievement was a vicarious one (Steiner 108-9).

Steiner’s recollection hits upon two central issues of the fifties: firstly, the role of the wife and mother in the service of her husband and children as inculcator of morality and social purpose; and secondly, the fifties' domestic policy of containment of the female - echoing a national policy of political containment of subversive ideology. The resentment of such a policy is implied in Steiner’s acknowledgement of its regressive nature for the status of young women, ‘hurling’ them back to a “satellite role” they had escaped in their four years spent in education.
Ironically, what this “hurl” back to the home created was a form of cultural paranoia marked by a fear of the dominance and influence of the mother figure as the source of domestic subversion.

This paranoiac entelechy associates containment with subversion and creates a phenomenon of its own fear. Michael P. Rogin in his chapter 'Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood and Cold War Movies' associates the nature of family ideology of the Cold War era with a “fear of the sinister power of women in society”. This fear of female power, Rogin argues, generated the fifties’ “feminine mystique” that drove women back into the home, but failed to assuage fears: “for it made the home at once the arena of mom’s influence and the confined space which, in fantasies of female vengeance, she would rebel” (258). Hitchcock’s 1964 film, Marnie explores what occurs when the mother, as the moral centre of the home, subverts that position; a fact that leads to her daughter’s psychic unravelling. Domestic anxiety over the privacy of the family in relation to the state calls attention to the nature of familial privacy and, inadvertently, encourages state surveillance and intrusion. Over-concentration on domestic activity in particular, the sacred status of the family, leads to paranoiac state intrusion and politicisation of the private. Rogin points to the “unprecedented” involvement of the fifties state in family life as a paranoiac reaction to the crucial role of the mother in forming character. This role, developed in the 19th century, was perceived as “double-edged” in terms of its usefulness to the State: while it kept the woman safely contained within the home, behind those impenetrable walls, the vital business of character moulding was her charge. The co-reliance of the individual upon the state is the centre of Cold War ideology, Rogin argues, and so the state’s effort to promote ‘countersubversion’ relies upon the private citizen’s heightened sense of nationalism (239-40).
In a decade tyrannized by the ‘Red Scare’, the relations between private and public became increasingly interlocked as individuals, coerced by the threat of loyalty, began to work on behalf of public bureaucracies to counteract the Communist demon. These “bureaucracies” presented themselves “as the free man’s allies . . . his free enterprise system and defended it against Communism” (Rogin 239). Yet, the realm of the private citizen was under threat as the inquiries of the State led to the intrusion of the sacred domain of the private self. In a nation-state steeped in Communist paranoia, the loyalty and cooperation of the individual citizen was regarded as essential to the safeguarding of national security. Individuals with liberal political persuasions automatically came under suspicion, as Plath records in a 1950 letter to a friend: “You’re a Communist nowadays if you sign peace appeals . . . People don’t seem to see that this negative Anti-Communist attitude is destroying all the freedom of thought we’ve ever had . . . Everything they don’t agree with is Communist” (Wagner-Martin 59). As a pacifist, Plath records the impact of the ‘Red Scare’ phenomenon on her own political and intellectual freedom. As a young woman in the early fifties, Plath was directly exposed to the atmosphere of fear and suspicion of the ‘Scare’. The closest of her high-school teachers, her English teacher, was called before the Wellesley town board to “account for his pacifism”, while one of her Smith College professors had been the first academic to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee with names of ex- Harvard communist party members of the 1930’s (Schrecker 194).

The Bell Jar heroine is herself a victim of a nation bred upon paranoia. The opening line of the novel establishes Esther’s relationship to the execution of the Rosenbergs as traitors of the state. The thread of fear and paranoia that runs through the novel begins with the image of the
electric chair as the ultimate symbol of recrimination for the deviant and treacherous citizen. Later, when Esther herself receives shock treatment, it is as a result of her own social deviancy and treachery of the ‘norm’. Esther learns that mental breakdown is not something that can be tolerated, and the chaos of mental disintegration must be reordered and reprogrammed by a restructuring of the chemical patterns of her brain. Her electro-shock therapy becomes part of a process of re-socialisation back toward the ‘norm’ from which she has strayed. The fifties norm to which Esther returns is the pragmatic model of gender roles laid down by Talcott Parsons in which the woman is defined as “expressive” both by her nature and her nurture within the traditional nuclear family. Benita Eisler in Private Lives: Men and Women of the Fifties defines the fifties idea of good mental health as an ‘adjustment’ to the role of gender (34).

With the reinforcement of gender identity through the media, the female is contained by the role deemed appropriate by her society. The same media lay at the heart of the McCarthy smear campaign in which thousands of private citizens were dragged before tribunals and then publicly exposed in mass media (Macpherson 2). It was with the aid of the media that McCarthy himself came to the nation’s attention following the sensationalized coverage of the Rosenberg case and its equally sensational treatment by the Truman administration. McCarthy’s licentious charges that the State Department was infiltrated with communist party supporters came on the back of the Rosenberg case and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. The two events together brought anti-Communist hysteria to its peak. McCarthy’s wild accusations only gained credibility, however, for the support they enjoyed from Republican Party members. As his hearings gained more and more media attention, McCarthy’s campaign accelerated until it
became a deadlock partisan issue from which McCarthy reaped the benefit of extended media attention (Goldstein 320-21).

The drive toward communist 'containment' continued with the passing of the Internal Security Act in August 1950. Designed to prevent the functioning of communist-front groups, the bill made legal the round up and detention of dissidents without trial simply because the Attorney General suspected that such dissidents would “probably” continue in their activities (Goldstein 323). The Act came as a blatant encroachment to constitutional free speech and political association, an indication of the degree to which the State had become a blatant anti-Communist regime.

II: The Smith Girl: Conformity and the Struggle for Female Alternatives

Plath documents the indifference of the American people to the severe measures of the administration in her journals the day of the Rosenberg execution. In particular, Plath is disturbed by the absence of any emotional response to the scheduled execution, as if such events were regarded as a normal occurrence. The implication is that the sole of object of government is the eradication of potential traitors:

The phones are ringing as usual, and the people planning to leave for the country over the long weekend, and everybody is lackadaisical and rather glad and nobody very much thinks about how big a human life is, with all the nerves and sinews and reactions and responses that it took centuries and centuries to
evolve . . . There is no yelling, no horror, no great rebellion. That is the appalling
thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad that it could not be
televised . . . so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the-mill crime
program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional
reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored
and casual and complacent yawn (J 80-81).

The “tall beautiful catlike girl” napping on the divan in this journal extract from Plath’s
summer as Guest Editor of Mademoiselle, is the embodiment of the insouciance in the American
attitude toward the Rosenbergs: “I’m so glad they are going to die”. She gazed vaguely around
the room, closed her enormous green eyes, and went back to sleep (J 80). She is the most
grotesque example of what Nancy Steiner describes as the “conformist” female stereotype of the
1950’s: a young woman who had listened with “numbing disbelief to tales of Hitler’s nearly
successful attempt to exterminate the Jews and [who had] learned to live with the realities of the
Cold War and atomic capability”, and who now turned “inward” to escape such historical
realities. On a larger scale she is a reflection of a country faced with the dark reality of a war in
Korea who turns inward to escape the consequences of its own political actions. She is the Smith
girl who “raced off to college” to pursue her own ends with a suitcase “packed” with cashmere
sweaters to impress her peers, and a set of “unshakable convictions” packed along with them
(Steiner 10-11).

Steiner comments on the need for Plath and her Smith contemporaries to “work within”
the confines of “The Establishment”, although what that precisely was remained undefined
(Steiner 19). There existed a sense of obligation to those of the establishment who had assisted in getting her where she now was – at a prestigious women’s college in the heartland of the best-bred American intelligentsia. Thus, despite Plath’s indignation at the “conformist” stereotype, she is indebted to some degree to those conformist attitudes of the establishment that secured her a footing in that world. She is not, as is the author of The Bell Jar, a deviation from the norm.

Alternatives were impossible, particularly for the female. Marge Piercy recalls the utter “lack of support for choosing anything other than a narrowly defined norm”, and with the absence of subcultures, the fifties female had nothing else to “drop into”. The only form of rebellion remaining was juvenile delinquency, a watery and insipid alternative. As Piercy comments, these “isolated gestures” “trivialized” the anger behind the action: “Soapsuds in a fountain, a faked news story, refusing to use footnotes or keep hours, taking off [my] clothes. Either you got away with it because you didn’t get caught so it might as well not have happened, or you did it publicly and were promptly punished” (Piercy 114). Rebellion was something innocent and mild, the childish pranks of the adolescent population.

Goldstein quotes Norman Mailer’s comments in 1959 on the political environment of the 1950’s: “these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people”. Stanley Kunitz, English professor at Queen’s College, observed that students of the 1950’s would “matriculate cautious, wanting above all – so well conditioned are they by the
prevailing social climate – to buy security for themselves in the full knowledge that the price is conformity” (Goldstein 382).

What then, did it mean for the student of the 1950’s, to “buy security”? For a young woman like Plath it meant acquainting oneself with the ‘Establishment’ and its rules. She chooses Smith because she knows that it can “help” her by “opening more opportunities for aim and achievement than [she] could reach if [she] went anywhere else”. Her choice of college rides on this fact, and she derides herself for her “inevitable narrowness”, knowing that conformity is the price for opportunity (Kukil 47). The fact that Smith reduces her to one of many other girls being ‘produced’ to a set of social criteria is something she has to reconcile herself to: “God, who am? I sit in the library . . . girls everywhere, reading books. Intent faces, flesh pink white, yellow. And I sit here without identity: faceless” (Kukil 26).

Plath’s earlier work is scattered with images of the spinster-woman who failed to abide by the prevailing social rules: “Miss Drake” (CP 41); the “Two Sisters of Persephone” (CP 31); the “particular girl” of “Spinster” (CP 49); Miss Mason of “Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats” (CP 53); Gerd of “Crystal Gazer” (CP 54). These women are anomalies, deviants, and are perceived by society (and the poet) as aberrations of womanhood. Then there are the ‘strumpets’: the “sluttish dryads” of ‘On the Plethora of Dryads’ (CP 67); and ‘Strumpet Song’ (CP 33), the trapped wives in “The Shrike” (CP 42) and 'Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives' (CP 34) and the unhappy lovers in 'The Other Two' (CP 68). These women, like the lady in 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', are disembodied fragments, viewed by their society as failing to meet the
exact requirements of successful womanhood. Non-conformity has dealt them the social label of 'non' or "no woman" (CP 32).

**III: The Dreaded 'Other': The Communist Threat**

A social and political policy based on the idea of the "containment" of the aberrant, the 'normalisation' of the abnormal, and the homogenisation of the majority was undoubtedly born from a tremendous fear of intrusion. The infiltration of communism was the ultimate feared intruder-bandit of the 1950's; second to that was the bomb. "My nightmare is the H-bomb. What's yours?" Marilyn Monroe asked (Macpherson 29). It was a "season of fear", to use the term of Walter and Miriam Schneir who researched and wrote on the Rosenberg case. The authors quote the words of Jean-Paul Sartre who also perceived the tremendous fear consuming fifties America, accusing her of being so "sick with fear... you are afraid of the shadow of your own bomb... By killing the Rosenbergs you have quite simply tried to halt the progress of science by human sacrifice" (Schneir & Schneir 254). The judge who presided over the case labelled it as "a necessary by-product of the atomic age" and a "lesson" to other democracies (Shiner & Shiner 167). The case was regarded as a threat to "survival" of the United States and the "peace of the world" (Shiner & Shiner 120). In the rarefied paranoiac atmosphere of the early 1950's, the Rosenberg case became the perfect catalyst for the release of all that paranoiac fear. Truman’s 'enemy within' was expediently personified in the forms of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The enemy had been formerly identified and could now be eliminated.
The Rosenberg case became the hole in the dyke wall for American communist paranoia, the point of release for all her apprehension. This sudden gush of paranoiac energy equipped Judge Kaufman, the case’s Jewish judge with the rationale for the sentence:

I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted the Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding fifty thousand and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason (Shiner & Shiner 170).

The “Other”, the outsider, the spy, the Communist and the immigrant, in the case of the Rosenbergs, bears the blame for the entire breach of national security, betrayal of the State and most importantly, for shattering a nation’s belief in itself as the leading force in world power. The “Other” is the enemy, foreign, intrusive, and aberrant. The tribunal setting of the Rosenberg case extended across American society in the ‘50’s with its “Them” and “Us” mentality, with a deliberate demarcation of the individual according to his rank and social purpose. Particularly suspicious were those individuals who attempted to defy social definition. The process of “standardization and mechanization and control of the individual psyche” in American society that Allen Ginsberg perceived as pushing to the sidelines any “spiritual activity or Art” (Ginsberg, Journals: 7) was eliminating the chance of any deviant elements surviving. In a draft of his poem “Death to Van Goth’s Ear”, Ginsberg depicts the nightmarish reality of the ‘American Century’ in which he finds himself a part as a series of grotesque caricatures: “And
the American Century has been taken over by Franco murder of Lorca and the mad Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek who no longer sleeps with his wife . . . .” The poet in the role of the “Other” observes the process of destruction of “the soul of America” in which “the prophets of money” have “built up a war machine that will vomit & rear up Russia out of Kansas” (Ginsberg 407). The “diabolical conspiracy” of which the Rosenbergs are accused by the American State as outsiders, is perceived inversely by the artist as a conspiracy on the part of the State against the deviant individual. What is perceived in the language of the State as a necessary decision, i.e. execution of the Rosenbergs as part of the “life and death struggle” with the ‘enemy’, is to the artist and the freethinker, an act of suppression.

The “queer, sultry summer” of 1950 that contains Esther Greenwood is the paranoia and guilt of a nation who, like Esther, is obsessed with the guilt of the Rosenbergs, while at the same time, experiences guilt at its ever-increasing materialism. Her two most obsessive thoughts are the Rosenbergs and her consumer extravagance in buying “all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, lying limp as fish in [her] closet” (BJ 2). Somehow, the threat of Communism to security of the nation is associated with the threat of rank materialism to the nation’s spiritual life. An anxiety was setting in; what was the nation’s purpose other than to flaunt its own economic health? In the face of a decaying inner life, the need for ‘National Purpose’ became more necessary as the decade wore on. With Russia’s launching of Sputnik in 1957 the purpose of the nation became a technological and ideological retort to Communism. With Khrushchev’s visit to the U.S. in 1959, this retort became a crucial necessity after Newsweek reported the Soviet Premier as saying, “One way or another: We will bury you”. Time magazine perceived Khrushchev as “the embodiment of the elemental challenge” to the U.S. whose leadership was
pursing a “drive for world power no less sustained than that of Joseph Stalin” (Jeffries 453-4). In the New York Herald Tribune of September 17, 1959, Walter Lippmann attacked the stagnancy, complacency and inwardness of American society:

The critical weakness of our society is that for the time being our people do not have great purposes, which they are united in wanting to achieve. The public mood of the country is defensive, to hold on to and to conserve, not to push forward and to create. We talk about ourselves these days as if we were a complete society, one which has achieved its purposes and has not further business to transact (qtd. in “The Quest for National Purpose of 1960”. Jeffries, 1978: 454).

When society did look outwards it was with panic and paranoia, responding to its long-standing Cold War mission to contain the Communist threat. Containment also defined the U.S. domestic policy of the decade, and so, the traitor and the social rebel were one and the same: secessionists to the national cause. The cause itself appeared to be to achieve as quiet and easy a life as possible. A Look report in a 1960 reported that the U.S. seemed to be “a pond of calm and contentment”, while its people were characterized by a sense of “complacency, decency, optimism, and a preoccupation with home and family” (Atwood 11-15). A similar report in Life, December 1959, confirmed that the American people were revelling in the good life and home as economic analysts forecasted better times ahead for them. Reporter Kleiman in his U.S. News and World Report for October 24, 1960, noted the “optimism, a sense of confidence” in the national mood (56-57). However, beneath the veneer of a self-satisfied nation there were tremors
of fear for its spiritual well being. In response to its series on ‘national purpose’, Life magazine received a flood of letters reiterating a fear for the nation’s “moral and spiritual welfare – in particular, the gap between American ideals and reality attributed to excessive materialism (“Nationwide Response”. Life 1960. qtd. Jeffries: 465). Like Esther in New York, America was “meant to be having the time of [her] life”. The trouble was that, beneath its brazen mood of confidence and material abundance, America had denied its citizens the right to experience themselves as individuals. The individual experience had been drowned in a national consensus for homogeneity – the homogeneity of the ‘American experience’. This translated into a forced optimism in the face of such glaring prosperity and good fortune. Thus, Esther finds herself in New York, “the envy of thousands of other college girls just like [her] all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes . . . with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocket-book to match” (BJ 2). The ‘American experience’ that Esther has in New York, courtesy of Mademoiselle magazine, is nothing but the “real whirl” expected by cultural prescription. It does not make her unique; she has simply gained the experience that all young women of her age aspired to – to sit “drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lame bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion” (BJ 2).
The contiguous, inter-related relationship of the American self to the Communist Other is a subject of Plath’s 1960’s poems. This relationship, whose foundation is difference or alterity, is located in the interrogative question posited by the American Self/Same to this Other:

A difference between us?
I have one eye, you have two.
The secret is stamped on you,

This ‘you’ is the American doppelganger, the shadowy ‘Other’: a recipient vessel of the nation’s guilt and shame; a palimpsest of the American self, the “faint, undulant watermark” inscribed beneath the surface of the nation; an interior hidden self that causes anxiety and shame, and must be erased:

Will it show in the black detector
Will it come out
Wavery, indelible, true? (‘A Secret’, CP 219)

The “it” is the deemed insanity of the communist ‘Other’ (Castro’s “psychotic personality” cited in a 1961 State Department memo (Etheridge 1-2), the anxiety of corruption from within the United States by the penetration of the U.S. by that same insanity. In the light of Martin Buber’s
philosophy of dialogue, the “it” of the Communist Other is that which cannot be interpreted or translated by the American Self because it is not given the status of a Thou. In the words of Ronald Gregor Smith, Buber’s translator:

The other person, the Thou, is shown to be a reality -- that is, given to me, but it is not bounded by me: “Thou has no bounds”; the Thou cannot be appropriated, but I am brought up short against it. The characteristic situation is one of meeting: I meet the Other. In the reality of this meeting no reduction of the I or of the Thou, to experiencing subject and experienced object, is possible (Buber vii).

Within this discourse the American-Soviet relationships is based upon an ‘I-It’ model of relations, one in which the Soviet ‘Other’ is objectified, excluded from the shared subject position of ‘Thou’ (Buber 8). The American Self or ‘I’ fears that it (‘it’ here being a syncretism of ‘it-self’ but also the ‘it’ of the communist Other) has been contaminated with traces of that very Other. According to Buber’s logic, this is not possible: “I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou (Buber 11); in order for the Other to influence the Self, there must be an ‘I-Thou’ relationship in place, and clearly, there was no such thing.

Plath’s ‘Cut’ (CP 235-6) explores the fear of subversion within the U.S: fear of the substitution of the American subject by an ‘Other’ - a fear iterated in such Cold War films as ‘My Son John’ (1952) and ‘The Manchurian Candidate’ (1962):
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, everyone.

Whose side are they on (CP 235)?

Confused loyalties, blurred allegiances, this is the subject of Plath’s poem; it is also the
preoccupation of the American Cold War self, a process that leads to the erosion of the clear-cut
boundaries of Self and Other - the binary opposition of alterity. Plath’s poem evokes a series of
alterities: white pilgrim settler: native American Indian; Klu-Klux Klan: black Negro, American:
Communist Other; American occidental: Japanese oriental; a colonial power struggle in which
the dominant white male order is forced into an uneasy relationship with the indigenous Other.
The corollary of this is a “thin papery feeling” - the ontological insecurity described by R.D.
Laing in The Divided Self (1961) - which needs “a pill to kill”. The bleeding into One-an- Other
is literally figured here as: “The stain on your/Gauze Ku Klux Klan/” in which the ‘Other’,
figured as ‘Babushka’, becomes responsible for the darkening and tarnishing of the ‘One
(although by bleeding the two together, there is a mutual elision of the other). This poem, thus,
explores the idea of subject substitution in which the ‘One’ becomes the ‘Other’: male-female,
self-other. This begins with the opening line of the poem in which the subject of the poem – the
speaker’s thumb “instead of an onion” - is established. Except that this thumb, the subject, begins
to unravel, to discover itself. It has a “white” hat, “dead white” (an image that evokes the term
‘dead white men’) perched on top; but its interior is full of a “plush” red. The speaker’s subject
becomes the white male settlers of New England, the "Little Pilgrim". Yet, what clearly
becomes the subject of the poem is the already-there, already-present subject of the aboriginal
American Indian whose presence is inseparable, indeed contingent, upon the presence of the
imposing "Pilgrim" subject.

This already-present subject is forced into a subordinate position (literally, pushed back
into the interior) by the presiding white coloniser, whose white hat smothers the subjectivity of
its rival indigenous subject. Ironically, this position of interiority grants this already-present
subject a position of power and subversion, occupying as it does, the "heart" space or interiority
of the ruling order; this, in turn, brings its own opportunity for violence. Violence then, is the
means by which the process of subject-substitution is realised. At the centre of this violence
figures the "heart"-land, that interior terrain that permits the subject its centre, and hence, a
permissible subjectivity. It is this "heart"-land that is the centre of contestation. Hence, the
already-there subject meets the colonising power of the "Little Pilgrim" with violent resistance:
"Little Pilgrim/The Indian's axed your scalp". The outcome of this resistance is the usurpation of
the "heart" space – the subjective centre of the colonising power, figured in the image of the
turkey-carpet that unravels "straight from the heart". The ousting of the turkey is symptomatic
of the reversal of power and subjectivity at the centre of the poem. The turkey, redolent of the
Thanksgiving feast that celebrated the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers as the newly established
subject of America, marks a presence that signals the erasure of the indigenous population.
Hence, the "celebration" for which the speaker pulls out her "pink fizz" is, ironically, the
celebration of the already-there subject - a celebration permitted by the newly found space of the
former subject. This space or "gap" affords a new subject, a new history; it signals the end of the
old meta-narratives of the colonising white order. Into this gap “run” (like blood) “a million soldiers” whose homogenous uniformity is simply a substitute for the uniformity of the previous order - for they are “redcoats, everyone”. Hence, one hegemony is replaced by another; one subject for an ‘Other’.

The alternative process of violence that accompanies the actions of the colonising “Pilgrim” is appropriately industrial, synthetic in nature, and represented in the image of the “baled pulp” of “your heart” in the penultimate stanza of the poem. This violence then, like all grand gestures of organised, national-level violence, run a natural course and eventually must confront the teleos of that violence. This is the “small/Mill of silence” when the process of subject substitution - that is at the heart of all colonising violence - is at an end. The silence that follows the eradication of the already-there subject terrifies the perpetuator of that violence, and he ‘jumps’. In Plath’s poem, the process of subject substitution leaves a “dirty girl” - not a white male that the poem began with - a conflated image of alterity: “dirty” evoking unclean or soiled; coloured in someway and, therefore, non-white. This ‘heart of darkness’, or alterity, that is the interior landscape of the white majority unnerves the presiding, colonising subject, and he is forced to jump: to abandon his subject position.

Plath’s poem explores the cultural anxiety attached to the ruling American subject position and the relation of that position to the Other. This anxiety induces the creation of what Judith Butler calls a “phantasmagoric self-construction”; in other words, an imagined self that travels beyond the limits of the actual and exists within the time-space of the Other as invisible but ever-ready presence (Butler 12). Thus, the American self is able to extend the boundaries of
its own purview, albeit fantastically. In terms of the Cold War backdrop to this poem, this is the ‘hot line’ established between Washington and Moscow following the Bay of Pigs debacle, a means by which Washington’s phantasmagoric self could convince itself of its extended purview (penetrate then “withdraw its tentacle” (‘Words Heard, by accident over the phone’, CP 203). Like the speaker of Plath’s ‘The Rabbit-Catcher’ (CP 193-4), this pseudo-relationship between Self and Other is based upon the reciprocal imagining of the other in which each is the product of the other’s fantasy. These imagined selves are an integral part, indeed constitute the very relationship between Self and Other: the American administration and the Soviet state. Like “tight wires” these imagined selves penetrate the respective national psyche; they are “too deep to uproot” and run “ring”[s] around the subject in question. Into this fantastical space creeps the projected fears of the Self; thus, the Other becomes a “cry” or a “dark thing” - the product of the sub-conscious dream world of the self - a thing that “nightly . . . flaps out/ Looking, with its hooks, for something to love”, something to penetrate (‘Elm’ CP 193). And so we return to the primordial fear of the subject-self - that it will be displaced/replaced by its own shadow.

The ‘you’, then, that is the subject of the speaker’s discourse becomes the ultimate referent - the ultimate agent of subversion - that threatens to undermine the position of the subject ‘I’. This ‘you’ acts as a kind of doppelganger or shadow self, a reminder of the self’s denial of its own self-constructed alterity; and therefore, its denial of difference. In terms of the context of the Cold War, this is the American administration’s repeated erasure of heterogeneous positions. In denial of its own alterity or the existence of different subject positions, the dominant American subject reflects back an absurd self-image: “Behind two eyes in which nothing is reflected but monkeys” (‘A Secret’, CP 219). The solution to this is that same process of
phantasmagoric self-construction. In ‘The Other (CP 202-3) this phantasmagoric self is reflected in the “cold glass” that inserts itself “between myself and myself”, between Self and Other; a self-construction that is induced by fear: the “sulphurous adulteries” that “grieve in a dream” (CP 202). The mirror, serving as the refracting/reflecting surface stands for the administrative propaganda machine - the media - the process by which the Other is culturally translated: fixed, determined, and thereby constituted. This process of subject -constitution denotes omission, exclusion, and foreclosure (Butler 8). Ultimately, this phantasmagoric self-construction erases the presence of the Other; and there is no dialogue, no binary dialogism. There is no Self, for ‘One/I’ - any subject position - cannot exist without the Other; and so we are led to “Zeros, shutting on nothing” (‘The Rabbit Catcher’, CP 194).

The subject-space then, becomes a blank canvas upon which the Other projects all its’ fears, its own shadow. In the case of American relations to the Communist Other, and in the case of American-Cuban relations in particular, Cuba constitutes the blank space “onto which the narrative of representation that the U.S. could imagine as true was written” (Nadel 187). Plath’s ‘Burning the Letters’ (CP 204-5) presents an image of the “white fists of old/Letters and their death rattle”, an image that conffates the act of destroying ‘real’ evidence of the Other – in this case, Cuba - with the resistance that this Other constitutes: the “white fists”. These destroyed “letters”; literally, the signifying mark of the Other, is erased, and in its place emerges a remarking, re-representation of the Other. Thus, the feared Other becomes a ‘psychotic personality’ (as the speaker of ‘Burning the Letters’ comments, something “not subtle” (CP 204) in keeping with the American need to imagine the very worst (Castro was labelled by the CIA in a 1961 State Memo as such, Etheridge 1-2). This reconfiguration of the Other positions the
United States, as Nadel comments, “not only as reader but as authority of the narrative (Nadel 187), and so can bring an “end to the writing” that is the narrative of the Other (CP 204). As Nadel points out, the conditions under which the liberation coalition that was planned for Cuba in the lead-up to the missile crisis operated “made legitimate speech impossible”. Nadel expounds:

The liberation government was either authorising speech it hadn’t authored or authoring speech it didn’t believe ... it compromised the blank space that gave speechless nominal authority to an infinitely reversible flow over whose origins and goals it had no control ... This liberation government was the homemade product of U.S. imagination ... the function of the liberation government was to signify legitimate Cuban authority ... it failed to fulfil its function, becoming instead, a sign of the impossibility of locating a site of authority within a coherent, logical system (Nadel 184-5).

Like the speaker of ‘The Other’ (CP 201-2) the liberation government functions as a sheet of glass that reflects back the image of the Other. The “effect” of this image is to arouse a hostile response in the American people regarding the Other; and so the Other becomes devil, monster, and tyrant, anti-democratic, anti-American. The liberation government – itself a “product of U.S. imagination” - reflects back yet another imaginary self constituted by the administration’s prevailing discourse on Cuba. Inflammatory, provocative, the image of the Other causes the desired “effect” in the American mind - here represented by the reactive image of the self that scratches “like a cat” (CP 202). Provoked, the American imagination
(represented by the actions of the liberation government) duplicate the hostility of the signified Other. Yet, as Nadel points out, the liberation government failed to locate itself as “a site of authority” within this imaginary space that constituted Cuba; in other words, failed to effectively signify not only itself as “legitimate Cuban authority” but also Cuba as the monstrous Other that necessitated a hostile response. In Plath’s ‘The Other’, the speaker of the poem declares a position of absolutism over her subject – the Other: “I have your head on my wall. /Navel cords, blue-red and lucent” (CP 202). Contrary to Butler’s thesis (‘Contingent Foundations’, 1991) there is a fixed subject available; indeed, the speaker reduces her subject to a hateful fetish, positioning herself as the ultimate source of authority; indeed, the only authority, in regards to the Other. In what amounts to an act of totalitarianism, the speaker usurps the voice of the Other and makes it her own: she herself now constitutes that which is Other. The trope of the revolutionary colours, “blue-red and lucent” is an ironic comment on the speaker’s own subversive position in relation to her subject – which she has now ousted. Revolution or subject-substitution was what constituted the rhetoric of the American administration in regards to Castro in the lead-up to the Cuban missile crisis. The Bay of Pigs debacle was fuelled by a rhetoric of elimination – the elimination of Cuba as subject embodied by its leader – Castro. “Get rid of”, “remove”, “eliminate” frequently attached themselves to the subject - ‘Castro’ - a construction that entirely reflects the desire for subject-substitution. Indeed, during the Kennedy era, three assassin plots were taken to the point of “delivery of a murder weapon to a possible assassin” (Freedman 150). In the fall of 1961, McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor, wrote to Rusk, Secretary of State, for a “contingency” on Cuba. This contingency, delivered orally, was that “Castro would in some way or other be removed from the Cuban scene”, a plan that, Freedman concludes, was requested by Kennedy himself (Freedman 151).
The relationship, then, of the American nation-state to the Cuban Other signifies a desire to erase the difference or différence of the Other, to secure only the place of the ‘same’ or self – which constitutes the American ontology. As Derrida writes:

'différence' is “the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites . . . on which discourse lives, not in order to see opposition be erased but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the différence of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same” (Derrida 17).

In the U.S. “economy of the same” there is no place for différence, for the terms of an oppositional discourse. Plath’s ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ (CP 193-4) describes the attempt to impose homogeneity as “a place of force” in which speech is “gagge[d]” and the voice of the speaking other is ‘torn off’ (CP 193). The elements that conspire against the free speech of the speaking Other is a metonymic language for the totalitarian self that ‘forces’ the speech of the Other into “one place”: a fetishised position, a position of containment, a ghetto:

There was only one place to get to.

Simmering, perfumed,

The paths narrowed into the hollow.

And the snares almost effaced themselves –
Zeros, shutting on nothing (CP 193-4).

The voice of the ‘I’, which is the voice of the speaking Other, is reduced to “nothing”. The topographical, typographical collapse of the ‘I’ signals an erasure, and a quietness follows: “the absence of shrieks/ Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy” (CP 194). Thus, the rhetoric of Khrushchev’s “We will bury you” acts as a cruel deflection against the speaking Other; in Plath’s poems it is the American subject that buries the speaking Other: the Other is, literally, made to eat his/her own words. Kennedy’s riposte, of out competing the Soviets, seems to have been realised (Fried 148). The final image of the poem is of a pair of hands with the “intent” of strangulation: “I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt/ Ringing the white china” (CP 194) – an image that signifies the end of a “relationship”. The speaking Other suggests that the collapse of relations between self and other are the result of prejudices “too deep to uproot” and a mind – that is to say, a mindset – “like a ring/Sliding on some quick thing”(CP 194). What has killed the discourse of difference/différance is an inability to embrace the tensions that result from discourses of alterity.

Friedman, following the 1963 Vienna Summit – this time in relation to the Soviet Premier - describes the “composite picture” that constituted the U.S. notion of the Other. The picture of Khrushchev that emerges in the mind of the American administration is of “a crude peasant with opinions on everything, a mischievous charmer one moment and a bully the next, a student of power with a tendency to gamble and push his luck, a committed Marxist who was always prepared to bargain. In short, the Soviet leader was quite unpredictable and often deliberately so” (Freedman 55). Freedman’s prose betrays the incomprehension on the part of the
American administration toward the communist leader: a failure of communication if you like. At the heart of this miscommunication is the idea of the untranslatable quality of the Other or, what Walter Benjamin terms in relation to language as sheer ‘foreignness’. It is this ‘foreignness’ that defies translation – and in turn – defies representation. What it demands instead is the condition of permanent flux, of permanent contestation that is at the heart of any cultural communication - of which language is the primary means. Complementarity is the essential prerequisite to cultural communication; the licence to view the Other as something unfixed and indeterminate in relation to self (Benjamin 1968). In terms of Cold War American-Soviet relations, this position was ill afforded. Interestingly, following the Vienna summit, the idea of a Moscow-Washington hot line came into being – an attempt, perhaps, to redress the fundamental problem of miscommunication at the heart of that relationship.

The image of a phone line, and the corollary trope of speech, is a dominant image in ‘Daddy’ (CP 222-224). The speaker declares the incomprehensibility of her father’s foreignness in relation to herself: her father is German, or Polish – the two nationalities appear to represent an otherness the speaker cannot penetrate:

I could never talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare (CP 223).
Then, she proceeds to try out the language of the Other, ‘Ich, ich, ich, ich/ I could hardly speak’; but her tongue cannot translate its foreignness, cannot accommodate the strangeness of its syllables; its phonetics. The speaker experiences that moment of untranslatability that Benjamin terms “the element of resistance” in the process of translation, a resistance that lies at the very heart of difference/différence.

Kennedy’s June 1962 ‘University’ speech at the American University – known as the “peace speech” – betrayed Kennedy’s awareness of the polarised rhetoric applied to the Soviet Union. Kennedy called for a re-examination of the ‘Other’ in order “not to see a desperate and distorted view of the other side” (qtd. Freedman: 267). Kennedy then called for a ‘reversal’ of the arms race (the signifying agent of this rhetoric): “we are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons” (Freedman 268). While the rhetoric of Kennedy’s speech suggests an attempt to embrace difference – the merger of Self and Other in the plural pronoun – and the call for a more balanced view of the Other, this can only be read as a piece of clever rhetorical diplomacy. Certainly, for a brief moment, Soviet and American self jointly occupy the subject space; surely, only a political idealist could be convinced by such rhetoric. The “desperate and distorted view” of the Other has its origins in a fear of self-substitution – that, apparently, only an arsenal of “counterweapons” can keep in abeyance.

A year before Kennedy’s “peace speech”, Eisenhower had brought to the public attention in his Farewell Address - a speech redolent of conspiracy theory – the peculiarly homegrown
phenomenon of the "military-industrial complex". Eisenhower's rhetoric is full of the fear of an Other occupying the American subject-space:

The total influence - economic, political, even spiritual - is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government... We must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, our resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society (Public Papers of the Presidents 1960: 1035-40).

It is the fear of a threat to the "American way of life" that Eisenhower warns of; a threat from within by a subject masquerading as the American "way of life" - a shadowy 'other' self whose existence threatens the integrity of the American subject. This threat must be removed, and in order to ensure this, a campaign of vilification is launched.

The speaker of Plath's 'Daddy' (CP 222-224) labels the language of the Other as 'obscene', morally corruptive - an agency of vilification (CP 223). She confesses that her moral outrage is rooted in fear: "I have always been scared of you", and in order to placate this fear she creates a "model" of the Other - a recipient fetish. This process of fetishisation marks the end of her relationship with the Other: by creating a fetish to substitute the actual presence of the Other, she substitutes the real for the unreal, and so removes the threat of self-substitution. Thus, fantasy suspends the need for a real-time relationship with the Other, and Self and Other exist now only diachronically. The final step is to remove the "root" of that relationship - the "black telephone" - symbol of the synchronic. Finally, the speaker reinforces her position by seeking
support from the group, the majority, the ‘we’ of the American nation: “There’s a stake in your fat black heart/ And the villagers never liked you. They are dancing and stamping on you”. By appealing to the stereotype of the Other as a vilifying agent, the self succeeds in dismantling, then reconstructing the Other in the image of its own fantasy - a stereotype that remains safely suspended outside the subject-space. The fetishisation, or overt objectification of the Other, thus re-secures the subject-space. In terms of American-Communist relations, this is the ratifying of domestic security by acts of aggression, acts now justified in the face of an emergent, now-threatening Other; and so one form of imagining leads to another.

IV: Behind the American Dream: The ‘Organisation Man’

The social critic, William H. Whyte, whose work, The Organization Man (1956) defined the decade’s ‘Social Ethic’ as belonging to the group rather than the individual, located this ethic in the need for “belongingness”. Conformity to the demands of a group left the individual without the responsibility of creative processes, and allowed him to follow, uncritically, the criteria of the institution of which he was a member. It made for an easier life and could be achieved quite simply by means of behaviouristic social engineering (Lears 44). David Potter’s People of Plenty (1954) clarified the state of post-war “abundance” as the reason for the swelling materialism: “As abundance raised the standard of living it did far more than multiply the existing kinds of goods. It caused us to use new goods, new sources of energy, new services, and in doing so, it transformed our way of life more than multiply the existing kinds of goods. We were passive, abundance was active” (Potter 68). The passive accumulation of goods that Potter observed was, according to Whyte, the work of “the dominant members of our society”, those
“organization” men who left the quiet lawns of their middle-class suburbia to enter the “vows of organization life”. The corporation to which he belonged, whether it be “the seminary student – in church – the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics Ph.D. in a government laboratory”, spoke to him in the language of the great American Dream, propping up the idea of the rugged and determined heroism of the individual while, at the same time, reducing him to a particular collective (Whyte 3). The language of the ‘Dream’ was the incentive to win more members into the group, and thus support the process of corporate profit and expansion. This was the ‘Social Ethic’ of the corporate world dominating middle-class life, the particular ethic that Esther’s Buddy Willard is destined to join as a fully-fledged ‘corporate’ doctor, and that Esther herself tastes in her summer in New York through the trappings of the fashion industry and their “piles and piles of free bonuses”. Cynical as she is about all this “free advertising”, her summer materializes from extravagant corporate marketing and this experience, in turn, leads her to the experience of breakdown.

Esther leaves the city, locus of corporate life, with a rapidly unravelling psyche. She returns to the ‘motherly breath of the suburbs’, scene of middle-class domestic life, standing in the wings of the corporate world she has left behind. The return to the suburbs marks the second phase of her initiation into the sterile world of homogenised America. The life that takes place behind the “white, shining, identical clapboard houses” is nothing more than an extension of the corporate world of the city. The suburbs are the material manifestation of the organization man’s accumulative work, his days and days spent behind the desk in the city. They are the sum product of his achievements, the monument to his membership in the corporation. The “escape proof cage” that Esther retreats to is the realm of the mother, the housewife and wife, of “lawn
sprinklers and station-wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies” (BJ 109). It is the shadow-life of the corporate male, his Other.

Buddy Willard is Esther’s “Organization Man”. He waits in the murky corridors of the psychiatric hospital to rescue her from psychic chaos. His mathematical, mechanistic self offers her the solution of American science, technology and industry, committed, as Nixon explained to Nikita Khrushchev at the 1959 American Exhibition of Kitchens at Moscow, “to make easier the life of our housewives” (Macpherson 45). Buddy is the alternative to the murky world of psychiatry whose practices Plath herself acknowledged had become “the God or our age” (J 61). Buddy’s “flat and level” mind “laid out with measured instruments”, filled with “geometric concrete walls and square, substantial buildings with clocks on them, everywhere perfectly in time, perfectly synchronized” (BJ 301). Buddy is the ideal self, the successful, corporate, mechanised self; the self synchronized to the ‘ticking’ of the social machine. Thus, he perfectly mirrors the contemporary sociology of structural functionalism with is declaration that no self could exist apart from society.

Buddy is Esther’s social self. He is the male desire behind the fifties female stereotype that propels her toward New York and the world of Mademoiselle magazine and then envelops her psyche (Macpherson 54-7). The invasive, reified atmosphere of the city encroaches on Esther’s private self, destroying the boundaries between her public and private life. The two become dangerously enmeshed, and precipitate her breakdown. The breakdown is a direct result of the melding of Esther’s private and public selves, and their resulting amorphousness. Thus, Esther retreats to the suburbs where, as a citizen of the U.S., she assumes her private life will be
offered the safe cradle of motherhood and domesticity. A four-fold birthday card designed by Plath for her Grandfather, "For Grampy, From All of Us" (1942-57) features the Plath family as the model American family in a suburban setting - embracing what Eisenhower called "the American way" of life ("Eye Rhymes' Exhibit, 2002). A placid suburban house forms the subject of another piece of Plath artwork (Pen and ink, "Eye Rhymes' Exhibit, 2002): the ideal American home surrounded by the ubiquitous picket fence to keep out the marauding 'other', the eyes, the ears, the "little whore tongue" of the "eavesdropper" (CP 260). Both pieces are a comment on the hegemony of the suburban lifestyle – a lifestyle that tolerated little difference.

However, as Esther is quickly to learn, the lack of stimulus at home is as much a threat to her self-government as the organizational demands of the city. In the suburbs she discovers that the life of the American housewife is just as much pre-emptive, leading to the "whole sprawling paraphernalia" of suburban motherhood and domesticity embraced by Esther's neighbour, Dodo Conway. Dodo's house does not conform to the socially prescribed "community" style of "adjoining lawns, and friendly, waist-high hedges" (BJ 112), and in Esther's neighbourhood this is regarded as "unsociable". In 1950's suburban America the notion of privacy, analogous to the notion of democracy, carries its own organizational restrictions. Dodo Conway lives a life that does not prescribe to the norm: she has seven kids instead of 2-4, and her house is painted brown and grey instead of the "white clapboard" of the rest of the neighbourhood. These seemingly minor infringements of the suburban code are enough to undermine her privacy. She is an anomaly and the "talk of the neighbourhood" (BJ 112).
In her article "Penetrating Privacy: Confessional Poetry and the Surveillance Society", Deborah Nelson explores the issue of the invasion of the privacy of home life during the Cold War era. The atmosphere of intense suspicion that pervaded the public life of the nation, Nelson declares, was given no abatement in the home. The home, symbol of the vested achievement of corporate enterprise, paradoxically, became a centre of suspicion itself by virtue of its non-public position. The security of the home, an essential part of the American Dream, was now coming under attack. The policy of "containment" identified by Michael Rogin and Marge Piercy with its regulation of political activity entered the home and thus shattered its illusion of security. Nelson cites the publication of The Eavesdroppers, a series of studies revealing the invasion of privacy committed against private citizens by "government, big business, higher education, medical research, and computer databases" (Nelson 89). This publication incited a huge public debate over the individual’s right to privacy, demonstrated in an increasing number of Supreme Court cases involving an invasion of privacy. Cases such as Poe V. Ullmann in which police ‘trespassed’ private bedrooms in order to search for contraceptives (banned by a Connecticut statute), and Mapp v. Ohio where again, police entered a private home, this time without a warrant, exposed the fragility of private boundaries and the need to reinforce these. Ironically, Nelson regards the work of writers such as Plath as contributing greatly to the literary and political reassessment of the home. By “writing within the home about the home” Plath and her contemporaries shattered the fantasy of domestic tranquillity and pushed the home into the arena of political and literary debate (Nelson 90). The "spatial reification of the home as an arena of security and respite from the cruel world of work" was under threat (Mcdowell 73). Thus, on a
political and literary level the fifties domestic ideology of containment exploded through the medium of confessional poetry, as the world behind the back door was suddenly open to public viewing.

This view through the back door is what Esther desperately attempts to block on her return to the suburbs. Just as she views Dodo Conway from the refuge of her bedroom windowsill, she in turn is viewed by the sharp eyes of her neighbour as she turns her face “by instinct or some supernatural hearing” to the tug of the window blind (BJ 113). This process of mutual surveillance from within the house and outside it constitutes the concept of enforced “community” subjected to all inhabitants of suburban life. Dodo Conway’s overgrown garden is not enough to protect her from the greatest “instrument of surveillance” in her neighbourhood: her neighbour and her neighbour’s house. Nelson cites Adrienne Rich’s poem 'September 21' in which the voice of the poet is the voice of a young suburbanite under scrutiny from neighbourhood houses that “tenderly appraise” and the “watchfulness of mothers”. The ‘gaze’ of the houses eventually “draw[s]” her in, and she becomes their captive. Rich implies that the desired information has been extracted; the community has acquainted itself with the knowledge of her presence (Nelson 89-91).

A 1943 mixed media illustration by Plath reveals a preoccupation with the theme of community surveillance (‘Eye Rhymes’ Exhibit, 2002) Plath’s drawing, entitled ‘The Neighbours are Gossiping’ shows two women gossiping over an image of house, presumably, the Plath family home. The illustration is accompanied by a rhyming textual commentary
The neighbours are gossiping over
back fences.

They think The Plath family is losing
its senses.

The speech of the two gossiping women dominates the 5 1/4" x 6" illustration. Plath has placed the speech of the two women above the image of the family home as the imaginative centre of the piece. These two boxes of text, written in Plath's juvenile script, are suspended over the family home like two imploding textual bombs. The cartoon-like depiction of the two women at the centre of the piece whose mouths, wide open in the act of gossip, convey the intensity of their whispering. Completed at age 11 years, the piece is resonant with a viscous irony. The loud /whispered speech of the two gossips tells a Chinese whisper about the Plath family history:

Otherwise why
should they
 guard
day and night
their house
belongings
from our sight?

Do they hide
diamonds
or rubies

or gold/

Are they afraid that

Their house may be sold? ('Eye Rhymes Visual Art and Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath', 2002)

At the bottom of the illustration, surrounding the house, two figures guard the family home, both armed. A question mark stands next to the house - symbol of family privacy. The armed figures protect the privacy of the home from the threat of surveillance. Clearly, privacy and its protection form the emotional centre of this piece of Plath juvenilia.

A later piece of artwork – ‘Woman and Street Scene’ (1948), shows a woman seated, sentry-like, at a window. The street below is all de Chirico angles: an “oblique, angular and exaggerated perspective”, suggestive of the guardedness and paranoia of the era (Kathleen Connors, Curator, ‘Eye Rhymes’, 2002). From a panoptic position, the female surveyor watches the life of the street below her, her bulky form spreading across the foreground of the painting; her demeanour: hawkish, authoritative and paranoiac, colludes with the angles of the street to intensify the feeling of suspicion surrounding her.

Surveillance implies a suspected guilt. Guilt itself is aroused by the presence of surveillance and, therefore, the voice of the confessional poet pre-empts the need for either surveillance or guilt. The confessional poet makes public that which, according to social decorum, would normally remain private. Surveillance becomes redundant in the face of
confession, overrun by self-exposure. Plath exposes not only the self, but also the self in its most private place – the home. Here, personal relationships are open to public scrutiny as well as the scrutiny of the poet herself. In a series of poems written in 1962 Plath deals with the issue of surveillance in the family home. 'Eavesdropper', like Rich’s 'September 21' exposes the cloying sense of community incurred by living in a suburban neighbourhood. Surveillance is again “local”, and invades the suburban poet-speaker’s private space in the guise of neighbourly concern: “your brother will trim my hedges” (CP 260). Those very hedges, symbol of suburban privacy, are to be removed to facilitate surveillance. The poet’s reaction voices the angry indignation of one who has suffered the presence of a trespasser:

This is what I am in for –
Flea body!
Eyes like mice

Flicking over my property,
Levering letter flaps,
Scrutinizing the fly
Of the man’s pants
Dead on the chair back,
Opening the fat smiles, the eyes
Of two babies
Just to make sure –
Toad-stone! Sister-bitch! Sweet neighbour! (CP 261)
The observer commands a view of the interior of the house and so a view into the personal life of the occupant. Plath as poet and occupant of the house exposes the scrutiny to which she is subject. Her anger at this unwarranted scrutiny is both her exposition and her art.

The phrase “No place like home” typifies the American’s attitude to the home as the place where an individual is most free to speak and act as he chooses. However, for the wife and mother, relegated to the home by remit of motherhood, marriage, domestic responsibilities, the home life becomes a place of confinement or containment, rather than a privilege of privacy.

Privacy, as defined by Anita Allen, is the “inaccessibility of persons to others’ senses and surveillance devices (Uneasy Access: 30). In addition to this definition is the definition of privacy given by Ruth Gavison as “a measure of the extent to which an individual is known, the extent to which an individual is the subject of attention, and the extent to which others are in physical proximity to an individual” (Allen 31). Given this definition, the traditional stay-at-home wife and mother enjoys extremely limited privacy, surrounded, as she is all day by young children and her responsibilities to them. In the role of caretaker in the home, the woman has little opportunity to exploit the benefits of privacy. Furthermore, in the legally and economically dependent position of the home, she is unable to make the decisions afforded to her by her male counterparts in the public world. Privacy is not therefore, merely a matter of personal space; for privacy to be fully enjoyed there must be equitable “social and economic patterns that substitute confinement to the private sphere for meaningful privacy” (Allen 54). For poet Anne Sexton, the home constituted nothing of privacy. Her poem ‘Wedlock (Collected Poems: 510) describes the home as a “spy pond pool in the backyard”, while her domestic reality is likened to a doll’s
house in which she plays the part of doll planted "in the all-electric kitchen" (Self in 1958, Collected Poems: 156). The domestic reality Sexton describes sees the female self forced to play out a role, and her privacy, a matter of something to be 'played' at. The doll-wife, "walled in solid" by the "noise" of others is forced to act out the fantasies of those who define her. As a product of the public sphere, she is male fantasy, designed to make normative a prescriptive form of female socialisation - of which the denial of privacy forms a part. Contained within the walls of a cardboard house, the doll-wife is afforded "little more" than a glimpse of the public sphere of the "city" that belongs to "someone" other than herself. Trapped within the mass produced reality of the suburbs, her reality, like the doll itself, is mass-produced. She is one of millions of other women who live without a sense of individuality or privacy, contained by a social policy designed to keep women at home, divorced from the public world, yet entirely without meaningful privacy.

In her study of gender and social space 1999 Linda Mcdowell points to the inter­relationship of houses and identity, of what she terms "material culture and sociality". Mcdowell's starting point is Levi-Strauss' anthropological notion of a 'house society', developed by J. Carsten and S. Hugh-Jones in their 1995 study About the House as an extension of the corporeal self:

The house and body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect. House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and
mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. A ready-made environment fashioned by a previous generation and lived in long before it becomes an object of thought, the house is a prime agent of socialisation . . . Moving in ordered space, the body 'reads' the house which serves as a mnemonic for the embodied person. Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental schemes of their culture (qtd. Mcdowell: 93).

The house, then, is a primary space of socialisation, and as culturally, it is associated with the female, it is a primary locus of female socialisation. Sexton's 'Self in 1958' is, mnemonically, the house which she inhabits; that social space which defines, constructs, and demarcates her existence as a social being. Plath's scrapbooks contain two undated collages featuring what Tracy Brain has described as "a pink dream of a kitchen" and a "white dream of a kitchen", collages that satirize fifties domestic fantasy (Brain 91-91). At the heart of this fantasy is the fifties female for whom the kitchen is a caged universe. The collages' female figures hover covetously around the parameters of their kitchen as art curators around private collections; these women are the perfect accessories to the great domestic oeuvre that is their kitchen. The female of "a pink dream of a kitchen" is the perfect compliment to her kitchen; the mother and daughter of the "white dream" collage gaze at one another with a look that confirms their place in this domestic utopia. Both collages suggest a sense of utter tangibility of the American dream and the centrality of the fully domesticated, fully accessorized female within that dream. The "dream" of the kitchen is the great Dream itself - a male technological creation - that included, as an extension of this fantasy,
the necessary female 'accessory'; the fifties housewife and mother. In the words of Sonia Kruks, these women of the "pink" and "white dream[s]" are, "so thoroughly [their] situation, so thoroughly its product, that no effective choice as to how it is to be lived is possible". In the Foucauldian discourse, they are constituted, not constituting subject (Kruks 13-140).

**Invasion of the Writing Space**

Meaningful privacy for a wife and mother has to be time spent away from her domestic reality where household management and supervision demand her attention. Privacy encourages self-development, and for women who use the home as a place for work, this is fundamental to productivity. For Plath, working from home, the study became the private place where writing could be produced. In her journals, she documents the unwelcome invasion of visitors to the home during her ‘private time’ - an interruption that forces her into the socially appropriated role of hostess:

Mrs H. materialized outside the study this morning: source of a great Fratch between Ted and me - - - my sense of surprise invasion. This is my own symbolic sanctum. Stunned, I asked her in. Ted got a chair & I & she both realized the awkwardness of it... I took her to see Nicholas, not before her eyes had taken in the study in such detail as offered - - - “this was the boys’ playroom” (which boys?). The sense that Mrs. H. wanted to see how we lived in the back rooms. She looked at my long unbraided hair as if to take it in, drink the last inch, and make a judgement. I very upset, angry. As if we could be observed, examined at any moment simply
because we were too shy or polite to say Nay, or She’s working, I’ll get her down. Or please wait here. My anger at Ted not being a man, not at Mrs. H., really (Journals, Kukil: 651).

Plath’s sense of righteous indignation at the invasion of her productive “sanctum” is in fact anger directed against the social institution of hostessing, whose duties automatically falls to the female of the house. Her husband, also occupied at home, fails to defend her right to productive privacy by allowing their visitor into the home, and therefore across the precious threshold of her private space and time. Mrs. H’s visit is an infringement on Plath the writer rather than Plath as wife or hostess, and implicated in this infringement is the husband whose passivity obligates his wife to perform socially. The close examination of the “back rooms” that takes place constitutes an invasion of privacy into the private spaces of Plath’s home - sheer voyeurism whose final aim is to “make a judgement” of the occupants.

Domestic voyeurism is a theme we see echoed in a classic fifties film – Hitchcock’s ‘Rear Window’ (1954). Jeffries, the film’s male voyeur, is housebound by a broken leg and takes to watching his neighbour’s apartments to pass the time. Jeffries plucks his subjects, principally female, as items for visual consumption. His hired nurse-aide, Stella, offers comment to this effect, quoting – as Jeffries points out - Readers Digest 1939: “We’ve become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change”. She calls Jeffries a “window shopper’. Detective Doyle comments on this essential fissure between public and private when he is called in by Jeffries to watch the apartment of Lars Thorwald: “That’s a secret private world you’re looking into over there. People do a lot of things in private you couldn’t possibly explain in public”. And so Jeffries questions the nature of his voyeurism: I
wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens?" He answers his own question with: "Of course they can do the same thing to me, watch me like a bug under a glass if they want to". Yet, the important fact in the film is that no one watches Jeffries; like Hitchcock himself, he represents the male director gazing upon his subjects — who, apart from the central subject, the suspicious Lars Thorwald - are all female. When he sends Stella down onto the street to find the name of the truck company taking the mysterious trunk away for Lars Thorwald, and then Lisa to deliver a note to Thorwald, he is, in effect, sending them out on the film set to 'act' as his subjects. The moment that he begins watching them from his apartment window/camera frame is the moment they become his subjects. This is confirmed when they wave to Jeffries from the alleyway, thereby confirming their role as 'acting' agents on his behalf, under his direction, following his cue. This trope comes to a climax when Lars Thorwald, the principal subject of Jeffries’ voyeurism, comes to Jeffries apartment to confront his audience/voyeur.

Domestic voyeurism is something that Plath also indulges in. On a reciprocated visit to Mrs. H. she takes special care in noting the contents of her front room, and in doing so, passes social judgement on her hostess:

I tried to notice colors, fabrics. Everything very very rich - - - deep blue velvet piled curtains, deep blue & white orientals, worn, elegant. A polished board floor. A bookcase containing, surprisingly, the Lord of the Rings, and, not surprisingly, all of Winston Churchill’s books on the war & English peoples. A lot of old gardening and travel books. I must look closer some time to get the thin titles” (Journals, Kukil: 651).
Plath’s intention is to seize as much detail as possible, hawking the interior of the home to furnish her writing. Her attention to interior detail echoes the women’s magazines of the era with articles devoted to domestic furnishings, intended to excite the female reader into concern for their own interiors. Attention to the interior of the home was nothing more than an encouragement to pay closer attention to the inner life of the family. The interior becomes a symbol for the household’s morals, and of the nation at large. By seizing upon the interior, Plath seizes upon the inner life of the American home, and its moral “sanctum”. A peep into the interior of the home becomes a cross-check for the state of household morals and the appropriateness of its lifestyle. Invasion of the private sanctum becomes necessary for the regulation of a normative American lifestyle. In the Cold War atmosphere of political containment the home becomes the place for the regulation of appropriate social behaviour.

Plath’s ‘The Tour’ (CP 237-8), sees the invasion of the family sanctum by the unexpected visit of an elderly aunt. The poet regards the visit to a household where spontaneous social calls are unwelcome and unexpected, as something socially inappropriate. Contrary to the normative socialisation of most American housewives, the speaker is not prepared for social interaction, and appears on the threshold to her sanctum dressed in “slippers and housedress with no lipstick”. She is ill-prepared for the role of courteous hostess thrust upon her and reacts sardonically to the presence of her visitor:

And you want to be shown about

Yes, yes, this is my address.

Not a patch on your place, I guess, with the Javanese
Geese and the monkey trees.
It's a bit burnt out,
A bit of a wild machine, a bit of a mess! (CP 237)

The visitor, expecting the experience of a gentile interior, is subject to a house of horrors. The inner sanctum of the home, far from providing relief and protection from external realities houses harrowing domestic realities:

this
Is where I kept the furnace,
Each coal a hot cross-stitch – a lovely light!
It simply exploded one night,
It went up in smoke.
And that's why I have no hair, auntie, that's why I choke

Off and on, as if I had to retch.
Coal gas is ghastly stuff (CP 238).

Plath invites her visitor into her sanctum then proceeds to destroy the idealised reality of the home-life by conjuring a series of absurd, nightmarish domestic scenes that chases the intruder away. Plath plays at terrorizing the conventional image of home-life through the character of her maiden aunt, ripping that image apart by subjecting it to images of a darker under-life. The absurdities of these darker images mimic the absurdity of the idealised notion of
the home. Plath’s exposé of the home as a place of chaos and destruction is inimical to the fifties
notion of the home as a centre of quiet security. In Plath’s vision of domesticity secrets lurk
within the walls of the family home that threaten to undermine its existence.

VI: A Defensive Measure: The Panoptic ‘I’

Violated privacy and the intrusion of the scrutinizing ‘other’ frame Plath’s series of 1962 poems; in ‘Three Women’ (CP 176-187) the intrusion of the ‘other’ is central to the confessions of the three voices, echoing the fearful teleology of the Communist ‘Other’. This male ‘Other’ is the presence of the medical authorities, an anonymous but ubiquitous presence whose white-coated agents make up: “The faces of nations, / Governments, parliaments, societies, / The faceless faces of important men” (CP 179). These “faceless faces” constitute the male officials of congressional investigative committees, of Hoover’s FBI and the Truman administration whose policies, designed to identify “politically tainted individuals” dominated American internal security (Schrecker 1998: xvi; 1994: 2). Like the white-coated doctors described by the “Third Voice” of ‘Three Women’, they “move among” their subjects taking them by ‘surprise’ (CP 179-80). The speaker identifies these “jealous men” as her adversaries, and hence the ‘I’ that is her textual self is engaged, textually and topographically, in a struggle with the image of “these men” who “would have the whole world flat” (CP 179). This struggle is synonymous with the erosion of the individual’s right to expression, characteristic of the Cold War era; thus, the ‘I’ of the text imposes itself in an act of defiance of those male agencies that threaten to “flatten and launder” her speech (CP 179).
The vertical imposition of the ‘I’ thus imposes its supremacy upon the text: what could be
called the panoptic ‘I’. As with Foucault’s panopticon, the elevated and protected status of the ‘I’
privileges the speaker with a complete view of the text; it also affords her a defensive protection.
Like the panoptic tower, the ‘I’ of the speaker asserts its vertical gaze over the topography of the
text whilst concealing the identity of the viewer - “The eye of a little god, four-cornered” (CP
173) - a position that valorises the scoptic mode. In the case of the Plathean ‘I’ it is a statement
of both self-defence and self-assertion against the intrusive gaze of the ‘Other’: “I am vertical/
But I would rather be horizontal” (CP 162). This is a statement of the speaker’s reluctant
position: defensive, hyper-alert, hyper-vigilant, paranoiac, a statement endemic of the Cold War
psyche. This panoptic ‘I’ is man-made, constructed, inorganic and superimposed. It is also a
defensive response to the intrusive and scrutinizing gaze of the male ‘Other’. In the case of
‘Three Women’ it is in response to the intrusion of the medical model whose subjects – the white
coated doctors (in The Bell Jar, Buddy Willard) - “move” among the objects of this model (the
“mountainy women”) inspecting, assessing and documenting their observations. This
scrutinizing process is imitative of the obsessive documentation and transcription of those sub-
Senate committees of the executive branch of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations,
concerned with cumulating evidence of the misdeeds of the communist ‘Other’.

For the ‘I’ voice of the speaker, however, the panoptic position affords her omniscience
beyond the language of the organic experience of these women, with whom she shares solidarity.
It also removes her from the male gaze and so spares her the experience of the alienated
individual (Kristeva’s ‘l’étranger’) (CP 179). From the elevated position of the textual ‘I’, the
speaker can disassociate from the activities of the intruding ‘other. Indeed, she can function as a
kind of tribunal judge, involved in her own process of scrutiny. Written in the interrogative voice, these 1962 poems closely mirror the congressional tribunals of the 1950's. 'Daddy' (CP 222-224) marks the climax of this series of 'hearings' in which the speaker herself assumes the role of chief interrogator, turning the table on her inquisitor. Indeed, the persona of 'Daddy', wields the same shadowy menace as the historical figure of Joe McCarthy or any other Cold War rhetorician. To take this analogy further, the function of the 'Daddy' persona is the same as that of McCarthy, a 'deus ex machina' that solicits a series of investigative 'hearings' on the loyalty of the speaker's self to her authentic self. The figure of 'Daddy', then, appears as some silhouetted form behind all these 1962 poems as a poetic device that pre-empts the process of self-scrutiny. Central to this process of self-scrutiny is the reconfiguration of the relationship of self to other. 'Daddy', then, is the watershed in this series of poems: the point at which the defensive panoptic position of the 'I' becomes an offensive. In an act of defiant retribution against the relentless intrusion of the 'Other', the speaker hijacks the voice of its antagonist. Before 'Daddy', then, the panoptic 'I' is a source of intimidation, but not yet absolutist.

'The Other' (CP 201-2) is Plath's most direct statement of accusation against the intruding 'Other'. Here, the speaker reconfigures the relation of self to other in a dramatic reversal that will be developed in 'Daddy'. The verbal bludgeoning of the 'I' has silenced the voice of the 'Other'; hence, what occurs is a form of ventriloquism in which the voice of the 'I' imitates the speech of the 'Other'. The speaker's verbal hostility mimics the political rhetoric of McCarthy's campaign of fear and coercion: "I have your head on my wall. / Naval cords, blue-red and lucent" (CP 202). Tinged with the imagery of a dictatorship, these lines are suggestive of the loss of political freedom afforded to the individual by the anti-communist crusade. The
surveillance of the ‘other’ mirrors the illegal practices of the FBI under Hoover. In a memo to Director Hoover, Attorney General Herbert Brownell authorized the implantation of microphones for surveillance purposes involving “espionage agents, possible saboteurs and subversive persons”. In the memo, Brownell excuses the violation of individual “trespass” as necessary for the “considerations of national security” and “national safety” (although, as Robert Goldstein notes, the FBI had been conducting illegal microphone surveillance since 1940) (Goldstein 340). The panoptic ‘I’ looms over the figure of its subject, wielding a frightening degree of rhetorical and topographical authority – a stance reminiscent of McCarthy’s Wheeling Speech, West Virginia.

VII: A Paranoiac Psyche: The Danger of Words

The confident position of the ‘I’ voice belies the tremendous paranoia associated with the verbal or written word. ‘Words Heard by Accident Over the Phone’ (CP 202-3) explores the loquaciousness of the ‘I’ voice in relation to the dangerous political environment. Indeed, the unchecked verbal flow of the first person voice is the most dangerous political tool for the ‘listening’ authorities. The “lover of digestibles” that is the voice of the poet-speaker threatens to compromise her political integrity, expose and betray her political persuasion. Indeed, the tremendous tension between silence and speech constitutes the metaphorical bulk of these 1962 poems. Speech necessitates danger and so the speaker of ‘The Courage of Shutting Up (CP 209-10) asks whether it is necessary for the tongue to be “cut out” (CP 210). On the political level, this rhetoric mirrors the corrosive effects of such Cold War governmental legislation as the 1950 Internal Security Act: in the words of Robert Goldstein this was “one of the most massive
onslaughts against freedom of speech and association ever launched in American history”. The Act included an emergency proviso for the roundup of suspected dissidents with indefinite detention (Goldstein 323). The stark profile of the ‘I’ voice draws the suspicion of investigators: elevated, defiant, theatrical even, the ‘I’ of the speaker demands an audience, spokesmen of the right to unguarded speech at the very heart of the American constitution.

Hovering over its audience, the ‘I’ voice wields the power of the transmitted word, reminiscent of early Cold War radio propaganda. As Paul Boyer notes in his 1985 study of Cold War propaganda: “American airwaves, pulpits, and lecture halls were full of frightening fare” designed to terrify a nation into submission. Boyer cites the example of a June 1946 radio programme devoted to the atomic bomb in which the programme’s narrator, Clifton Fadiman declares across the airwaves to his audience: “I sentence you to a few short years – in which to solve the problems posed by nuclear fission” (Boyer 65). As a piece of auditory, this dramatic rhetoric is very effective, particularly in the light of the recent explosion in Hiroshima. Hence, what Boyer calls “the politicization of terror” is directly related to the auditory power of the ‘I’ upon its listeners. The campaign of fear, propelled by the Truman administration, was dependent upon such staged pieces of rhetoric executed by the most dramatic means possible – in which the power of the rhetorical ‘I’ fell upon the ear of its listeners like a sharp axe.

Plath's 'The Courage of Shutting Up' (CP 209-10) explores the tension between speech and silence and the danger of verbal and visual communication of any kind – even within the environs of the home. This is a recreation of a tribunal of sorts, symptomatic of the prevailing tribunal atmosphere of the Cold War years. Indeed, the whole poem is redolent of the type of
inquisition described by those subject to the investigation of government agencies. One
transcript, taken from the series of 'Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the
Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security Laws of the Committee
on the Judiciary', dated September-October 1952, records the testimony of Philip Morrison,
nuclear physicist, whose interrogation before the SISS was based on a review of P.M.S.
1949. Morrison's review of Blackett's book exposed the harsh reality of the effects of nuclear
war: "the lingering death of the radiation casualties . . . the horrible flash burns, of the human
wretchedness and misery that every atomic bomb will leave near its ground zero" (Filreis 1996)
Morrison's account of atomic devastation shattered government propaganda that any defence
against such an attack was credible; hence, the material was deemed contentious and Morrison, a
subversive influence.

Like Morrison's testimony, Plath's poem alludes to this paranoiac process of interrogation
and transcription that lay at the heart of the Cold War administration. The speaker's silence is
belied by the image of 'black disks', 'disks of outrage', "loaded" with incriminating speech. These
are the spools of the recording tape, disks that carry quantities of vocal evidence of "bastardies.
/Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness" (CP 210). Although silence is the speaker's
central preoccupation, it is the potential for ending the silence that provides the immense tension
of the poem. This tension builds until the penultimate stanza when an image of an interrogation
chamber explodes into being. It is "the eyes, the eyes, the eyes" that do the interrogating here, a
metonymy for the terrible room[s] . . . in which a torture goes on". Plath's clever play upon the
theme of seeing, and being seen, suggests a power play between subject and object whose game
is played out against the threat of verbal betrayal - the betrayal of the informer. These are the
games of the interrogation chamber whose attendant witnesses are the "mirrors" that can "kill
and talk". Behind the reflective and shiny surfaces of these mirrors is the shadowy figure of the
informer. A 1953 article from the Columbia Spectator tells the story of "government
investigators in loyalty investigations of Columbia College students or graduates". During these
investigations, Columbia College staff were routinely posed the question of a particular student
or graduate: "Do you have any reason to question his loyalty, and if so why (Striker 1)? Plath's
poem points to what Victor Navasky describes as "the state's chosen instrument of destruction"
during the Cold War years - the professional informer - with (in the words of Edward Shils) "a
steady stream of information about the extent to which Communists . . . penetrated and plotted to
subvert American institutions" (Navasky 1). The presiding preoccupation of the anti-Communist
campaign was the gathering of intelligence against those deemed dangerous or subversive. This
intelligence was accrued by means of testimonials, a programme of enforced public speech. The
right to remain silent was offset against the right to free speech, both threatened by tactical
policies of intimidation and threats. 'The Courage of Shutting Up' is a clever exposition of the
Cold War obsession with disclosure and silence, the loss of freedom of speech described by
Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas as "The Black Silence of Fear" (Schrecker 1994: 1).
"The disks of outrage" testify to the loud and enforced silence of a generation in submission to
government authorities. The Communist Control Act of 1954 sets out the dangerous implications
of written or verbal communication that might implicate "the organization" (Filreis 1999).
Hence, the written or spoken word was loaded with danger, with the potential act of betrayal.
‘Burning the Letters’ explores the incriminating potential of the written word. As chief prosecutor, the speaker launches her case against the absent husband, gathering evidence of his infidelity. The household is divided in the face of this incriminating evidence until finally, overwhelmed by the guilt of her husband, she chooses to burn “the white fists of old/ Letters and their death rattle” (‘Burning the Letters’ (CP 204-5). The period of surveillance that began with the detection of “the Other” has become a full-scale campaign against the guilty party. The wife plays detective in a viscous campaign of incrimination that turns the domestic world into a crime scene. ‘The Detective’ (CP 208-9) intensifies the scene. Privacy within the home is destroyed by the climate of suspicion, and Cold War paranoia threatens to engulf family life. The obsessive interrogations of ‘The Detective’ indicate just how far this paranoia has spread from a social phenomenon into a personal and familial one. The home now resembles a place of “death” where a terrible crime has been committed against the occupants. The crime, which takes the form of a conspiracy against familial integrity, has transformed the idealized domestic life into a place of desecration. The speaker, obsessed with understanding the execution of the crime, searches the house for clues:

The death weapon? No one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all... Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?

Which of the poisons in it?

Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsers? Did it electrify (CP 209)?
This behaviour, an assault on household privacy, is now of no consequence. All that matters is the condemnation of the guilty. The speaker blatantly undermines the sanctity of privacy, tearing down the conventional boundaries of the home and exposing the hidden rift of husband and wife; and so domestic affairs become a public affair. The involvement of the reader in the speaker's private matters is a direct inversion of the American public’s concern with family privacy. Instances of the invasion of the sacred family space came in the early to mid-sixties with a series of cases documented by Justice Douglas of the Supreme Court. A series of U.S. government “Invasions of Privacy” hearings in 1965 are cited by Douglas as amounting to “an age of no privacy”:

Secret observation booths in government offices and closed circuits in industry, extending even to rest rooms, are common. Offices, conferences rooms, hotel rooms, and even bedrooms . . . are ‘bugged’ for the convenience of government. Peepholes in men’s rooms are there to catch homosexuals . . . Personality tests seek to ferret out a man’s innermost thoughts on family life, religion, racial attitudes, national origin, politics, atheism, ideology, sex, and the like. Federal agents are often ‘wired’ . . . They have broken and entered homes to obtain evidence. Polygraph tests of government employees and of employees in industry are rampant. The dossiers on all citizens mount in number and increase in size. Now they are being put on computers so that by pressing one button all the miserable, the sick, the suspect, the unpopular, the offbeat people of the Nation can be instantly identified (qtd. Nelson: 98).
Douglas' conclusion, that the "Government is using such tactics on a gargantuan scale and has become callous of the rights of the citizens" calls for serious measures against the abuse of personal privacy. As head of the family, the male traditionally bore the responsibility of safeguarding the privacy of the home. The cases of Griswold v. Connecticut and Poe v. Ullman cited by Nelson are instances of government authorities undermining that male safeguard. In the poetry of Plath, however, it is the woman who acts as safeguard of the home, and it is the woman who chooses to overturn that safeguard. The home becomes a place of surveillance and the reader, a surveyor of fraught domestic relations. In the tradition of American private life, this is a complete reversal.

VIII: 'We Will Usurp 'You': The End of Free Speech

The theme of interrogation and public inquiry continues with Plath's 'A Secret' (CP 219-20), a poem that explores the theme of detection and self-betrayal in the image of a policeman – a satiric echo of Joe McCarthy - with a guilty secret "stamped" to his being. The 'secret' is only faintly discernible in a palimpsest, a "faint, undulant watermark", that yet "may show in the black detector" (CP 219). This sinister domestic scenario serves as an analogy for the undemocratic processes of interrogation and investigation wielded by government authorities. At the heart of the poem is the scandalous image of "an illegitimate baby". This image implodes as a breach of secrecy, threatening the integrity of the ruling order. The 'I' of the speaker mimics the voice of the authorities, conducting an interrogation of her subject entirely in the accusative: "The secret is stamped on you" (CP 219). The accusative voice is a vehicle of interrogation: the "Brandy finger" that points "You, you". This accusatory 'you' replaces the imposing figure of the 'I'. The
This mock dialectical encounter between first and second person voices mimics the kind of staged rapprochement of the 1959 "kitchen debate" between American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev. In the famous World Wide photo of that encounter the American statesman addresses the Communist 'Other', in a show of rhetoric designed to convince his opponent of the superiority of the American dream. Body language, however, speaks volumes: Khrushchev is turned away from his 'opponent', while Nixon stares out upon those consumer goods deemed to be "the essence of American freedom" (May 16). Hence, the rhetoric of the American falls, if you like, between the "commodity gap" between the two nations, and the 'thou' of the Communist 'other' rejects the assumed superiority of the American stance - the 'I' of the first person speaker. Nixon's panoptic 'I' (here substituted for the great American "We"), assumes that an ideology that fixes the communist 'Other' within the gaze of the supervising, superior self of the American nation. Hence the communist 'Other' becomes a subject with a fixed meaning, subject to the judgement of the dominant American social structure whose ideology includes the right (in the words of Richard Nixon) to "have many different kinds of washing machines so that housewives can choose" (qtd. May: 17).

Hence, fixed by an almost zealous belief in the superior ideology of "the American way" of life, (Eisenhower's rhetoric), the 'other' as subject is subjected to ruthless surveillance and
investigation, a process mirrored in the McCarthy anti-communist crusade of the 1950’s. The “you: of Plath’s ‘A Secret’ satirizes the “superior” swagger of McCarthy’s subcommittee:

A secret! A secret!
How superior.
You are blue and huge, a traffic policeman,
Holding up one palm – (CP 219)

This male, investigative agency is set upon defining the “difference between us”, the difference that separates self from ‘other’, American from non-American, loyal citizen from disloyal – a paranoiac urge to locate those differences and have them defined as ‘Other’. The surrealism of the poem echoes the lunacy of the campaign:

Will it show in the black detector?
Will it come out
Wavery, indelible, true
Through the African giraffe in its Eden greenery (CP 219).

The sordid techniques of loyalty investigators, men such as Roy M. Cohn, appointed by McCarthy as chief subcommittee counsel of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, substantiate the image of the “knife that can be taken out/ To pare nails,/ To lever the dirt” (CP 220). Thomas Reeves, in his study of the ‘Fund for the Republic’, a think tank designed to assess the extent of the democratic violations of McCarthyism, cites the study undertaken by Adam
Yarmolinsky, 'Case Studies in Personnel Security', in which one security worker, with 26 years of government service, was “suspended from his position, for, among other reasons, (1) expressing unspecified “pro-Communist” remarks – an accusation based, perhaps, more upon his Russian-born decent and “slight accent” than anything else. The clerk’s statement includes a declaration of his “anti-Socialist, anti-Communist” background and his family’s experience of fleeing the “Red Terror”. It also includes a personal oath of allegiance to the American way: “I solemnly swear that I am not, nor have I ever been, a member of the Communist Party, nor a fellow-traveler, nor a member of any subversive organization, that I have never subscribed to any subversive publications, never attended meetings . . . I am 100% American (Reeves 2). Such examples confirm the paranoiac urge to iterate and reiterate personal loyalty to the American constitution in the face of public accusation. Indeed, the ‘guilty before proven’ approach of government investigations explains the ubiquitous nature of such outbursts.

The erosion of constitutional rights is a theme that flickers through these 1962 poems. The speaker of ‘The Courage of Shutting Up’ refers to “a country no longer heard of” whose “flags” have been “folded (CP 210) – a certain reference to the fragile position of individual rights to free speech and privacy during the Cold War era. As Deborah Nelson observes, the right to privacy in the home became one of the political preoccupations of the sixties (Nelson 89). In 'The Other' and 'Words Heard by Accident Over the Phone' (CP 202-3), Plath converts one of the most debated political issues of the Cold War era into a personal one. 'Words' (CP 270) sees the poet create a typical Cold War scenario in which an unknown source of surveillance penetrates the privacy of the home. This ambiguous source is personified as a silent and insidious presence
at the end of a phone-line, a persona whose undeclared intentions sullies the atmosphere of the home:

O mud, mud, how fluid! –
Thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse.
Speak, speak! Who is it?
It is the bowel-pulse, lover of digestibles.
It is he who has achieved these syllables.

What are these words, these words?
They are plopping like mud (CP202).

What makes the situation so pernicious to the poet is the ambiguous motive of the silent ‘speaker’ at the end of the line. The poet must discern, as with all those observed during the Cold War era, the loyalties and motives of its surveyor. The words emitted from the phone are not, as the poet suspects, for herself, but for her absent husband: “they are looking for a listener/ Is he here?” The voice of the conspirator searches the room for its accomplice and not finding him, “withdraws its tentacle”.

‘Daddy’: The Totalitarianism of the ‘I’

‘Daddy’ (CP 222-24) is the ultimate testament to Cold War violation of free speech. In an aggressive campaign of intimidation and terror, the imperiously armed figure of the ‘I’ succeeds
in disarming the voice of the second person. The speaker turns to the German first person pronoun for her assault against the 'other, its guttural sound perfectly suited for the purposes of 'roughing up' her subject. The aural resonance of "ich, ich, ich" is suggestive of the type of violence associated with Gestapo techniques of interrogation: brutal, repetitive and unrelenting. Thus the 'I' beats the second person voice into submission. Her tactics are cruel: seizing the 'you' of the 'other', she turns it upon her subject, brandishing it like a weapon over her cowering, defenceless subject. "Ich, ich, ich" is replaced by "you, you, you" in a clever inversion of textual identity. Semantically, she denounces the right of the 'other' to occupy the subject-space in an act of outright usurpation of the second person voice. The voice of the subject has been devoured, and within the body of the text, the semantics of the 'I' shields the identity of the speaker. In the tradition of totalitarianism, the speaker of 'Daddy' forbids the right of its subject to answer back; thus, the reign of the 'I' is absolute.

Daddy then, marks a hiatus in the relationship of the 'I' to the other. The usurpation of the second person by the panoptic 'I' signals a form of rhetorical totalitarianism or silencing of the other - reflective of the rhetoric of such Cold War figures as Joe McCarthy and General MacArthur. 'Daddy's famous 'ich, ich, ich, is evocative of the barked orders of General Macarthur as depicted in Carl MyDans photo for Life Magazine. Here, Macarthur is caught in mid-speech, rallying against his subjects with all the authority of a despot. Ironically, this photo, taken during the Inchon Landing, marked the height of Macarthur's despotic reign in an operation carried out against the advice of his colleagues, and which consequently marked the beginning of his demise (Carter 420). Macarthur's hefty presence upon the American political stage ended with his dramatic removal from office by the Truman administration. Captured in
full army regalia, waving to the masses, Truman is the very picture of a proud, but silenced despot (Wayne Miller, Magnum Photos Inc: Carter 420-1). The coarse, full-blooded rhetoric of his military campaigns has been replaced by a salutary gesture – the wave of a man eclipsed by his own hubristic vision.

Forced into submission, the ‘I’ of the autonomous self begins to withdraw; the imposing position of ‘Daddy’ cannot be sustained, as Plath’s final Ariel poems confirm. The seering force of ‘Daddy’s rhetoric cannot assuage the relentless assaults of the ‘other, and by the time of ‘Mystic’ and ‘Words’ (both written February 1st, 1963), the ‘I’ speaker has converted to the passive voice, and the textual presence of the ‘I’ is much diminished. In retreat, the ‘I’ has slipped beyond the horizon of the text, its imposing typography no longer posing a threat. Caught in the heat of its own explosion, the power of the rhetorical ‘I’ implodes. As in the televised debacle of the McCarthy hearings, the rhetorician is snared in the unloosed power of his words. McCarthy’s nemesis during the hearings, Army attorney, Joseph Welch, like McCarthy, was a consummate actor who savoured the public arena as much as McCarthy. Welch, profiting from McCarthy’s reversal of fortune, was able to capitalise on the Senator’s propensity for turgid rhetoric, turning McCarthy’s own oratory into a campaign of shame. Hence, the same sort of bullish rhetoric responsible for the Senator’s ascendancy also precipitated his downfall. His seering attack against veteran General Ralph Zwicker crowned a series of unfounded accusations: you’re “not fit to wear that uniform” McCarthy declared (qtd. Fried: 137). With the eyes of the nation upon him, McCarthy sank into disgrace. By June 1954 Gallup polls revealed 45% of the nation were negatively disposed to the Senator. Welch sealed the lid on McCarthy’s fate with the resonant: “Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last” (Fried 139)?
The speaker of ‘Mystic’ declares herself to be “used utterly”, reduced to a memory of her former self. The content of her rhetoric has become “dry and riderless”, governed by a doomful sense of pending fate. Demoted from the elevated position of the panoptic ‘I’ voice, the speaker no longer commands a view of the ‘Other’. Indeed, she now occupies the reduced, disadvantageous position of the ‘Other’ as she addresses her audience from “the bottom of a pool” where the “fixed stars” of an ‘other’s’ ideology and discourse “govern [her] life” (‘Words’ CP 270). What has occurred is a role-reversal in which the dominant discourse of the ‘other’ has succeeded in ousting the self from the platform of the panoptic ‘I’. For the sake of “decency” and because of the imminent threat to the discourse of the ‘other’, the theatrics of the ‘I’ have been curtailed; and so, the ‘I’ of the speaker steps down from her turgid and inflammatory position and surrenders her eloquence to the prevailing ‘Other’.

IX: In The Light of The Bomb: Domestic Retreat

‘A Secret’ (CP 219-20), reveals an ugly rift in the status quo of the home life. As in 'The Detective' (CP 208-9), husband and wife are divided by suspicion and conspiracy: the presence of a third party in the house. This is the illegitimate baby whose presence reinforces the disintegration of the household and its social transgressions. Not only are there infidelities, but now illegitimacy. As in 'The Tour' grotesque images proliferate, and the house becomes a ghastly fantasia. The illegitimate baby, is flippantly mistaken for “lingerie”, and by the end of the poem has become a “dwarf baby”, an ugly weapon skewered between husband and wife. The mutant baby echoes Cold War fears of the effects of the atomic bomb and those of Plath particularly,
whose poem 'Thalidomide' evokes the birth of deformed babies in 1960-1 as a result of the drug of that name (Hughes, "Notes": CP 294). The menace of the bomb creeps into the security of the home and threatens to further undermine its integrity. 'The Applicant' combines a fear of the bomb with the poet's own vituperative feelings toward marriage. The "applicant" is the prospective bride, a "living doll" who can "sew" and "cook" and will "so whatever you tell it". In the face of atomic threat, the doll is even "waterproof, shatterproof... / Against fire and bombs through the roof". Marriage thus becomes a matter of picking the right "doll", with the right credentials and a lifetime guarantee. She is even made to survive nuclear war.

Far from being a refuge from the atomic age, the Plathian view of marriage offers only personal desolation. The institution of the family that promised a harbour from the threat of atomic desolation lies in disarray. According to Plath, the redemption of the individual through familial life seems virtually impossible. For the majority of Americans, the threat of nuclear war presented the most pressing problem of the nation, and, according to Robert J Lifton had been carefully 'domesticated' by government civil defence strategies designed to reassure (May 23). A retreat into the nuclear family was the obvious psychological safeguard, and marriage was the first step in the retreat. For the heroine of The Bell Jar, marriage is offered as a normalising and preventive measure to mental disintegration. Esther, however, rejects the offer of marriage as a possible solution and, ironically, is labelled "crazy" by Buddy Willard for having turned down this chance of salvation (BJ 88-9). Apparently, Esther herself is not convinced of the necessity or redemptive power of marriage.
Esther’s scepticism of marriage echoes the opinions of other married couples of the decade, catalogued in the Kelly Longitudinal Study of 600 white middle class men and women living in New England. The Kelly study, the work of psychologist E. Lowell Kelly from the University of Michigan, involves the response of 300 couples from the late 1930’s to the early 1960’s. The most intense surveying was done in 1955, and from this group of surveys it is possible to understand why it was so many Americans bought into an almost rigidly normative family lifestyle. These responses, studied by Elaine Tyler May in her study of families of the Cold War era, are representative of the cultural norms set down by the dominant cultural group of the mid-fifties – the white, post-war middle class, of which Plath herself was a product. The tremendous embrace of family life was in part encouraged by the advice of experts who capitalised on the uncertainty of the cold war era to reformulate a domestic ideology centered on the family. Books such Norman Vincent Peale’s The Power of Positive Thinking offered professional advice on the family and public success in which the two were directly correlated. The ideal home was attainable with the support of experts. May quotes the anthropologist Margaret Mead, whose insight into the issues of the day stresses the association of public fears with private ones in an age of where uncertainty of the future is as much a concern of the world at large as it is for the individual family. Mead called for a new sociological model adequate for the “atomic age”, for “a world suddenly shrunk into one unit, in which radio and television comics and the threat of the atomic bomb are everyday realities” (May 27-28). Adaptation was deemed necessary for survival in a world in which technology and science increasingly dominated, and such was the advice milked from the experts by American citizens of the 1950’s. The family was the starting point for this process of adaptation. The reasoning was that if family life were secure, then the world around it would follow accordingly. Remaining within the secure
boundaries of family life guaranteed a reference point in a world where atomic science precariously balanced life and death.

This policy of domestic “containment” (May’s term) however, came with huge sacrifices to personal development. One KLS couple documented their disappointments in family life they had been led to believe would satiate all their longings. Joseph Burns records his shattered faith in the ‘ideal’ family life when faced with the brutal realities of the external world. For Burns, family life was not enough to ward off the harsher political realities of the decade. Writing of his middle class Christian upbringing, Burns rails against the inappropriateness of such a stance in the modern world:

I agree it does sound cynical, but let us face the facts. Mankind has been slowly degenerating, especially since 1914, and today, what do we have to look forward to? Civil defense tests, compulsory military training, cold wars, fear of the atomic bomb, the diseases the plague man, the mental case outlook? . . . I submit these things to show how a marriage can be vitally affected as was ours and, therefore, many of my ideals, desires, and, most of all, my goal (May 33).

Burns’ testimony indicates a high level of disillusionment with the public world that family life simply cannot eradicate. By marrying, Emily Burns, his wife, lists among her losses, “financial independence”, “personal achievements”, “friends of long duration”, “personality” and relationships with other family members. These, she understands, are the inevitable costs of maintaining the ideal nuclear family. Ultimately, both cling to this ideal as the one constant in a
precarious world. In a letter to her mother, Plath expresses a similar horror as Burns regarding international affairs. Like Burns, her predominant concern was the threat of the atom bomb in the hands of bullying international leaders; and like Burns, her refuge was family life:

I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of *The Nation* – “Juggernaut, the Warfare State” – all about the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America and the forces of the John Birch Society, etc; and then another article about the repulsive shelter craze for fallout, all very factual, documented, and true, that I simply couldn’t sleep for nights with all the warlike talk in the papers, such as Kennedy saying Khrushchev would “have no place to hide” and the armed forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the “inevitable” war with our “implacable foe”. . . I began to wonder if there was any point in trying to bring up children in such a mad, self-destructive world. The sad thing is that the power for destruction is real and universal. . . Each day seems doubly precious to me, because I am so happy here with my lovely home and dear Ted and Frieda. I just wish all the destructive people could be sent to the moon. . . (LH 438).

Plath attended a “Ban the bomb” march with her baby daughter Frieda, one of 40% of total marchers who were housewives (LH 378). Such a large percentage of wives and mothers involved in what Plath terms protest “against the insanity of world-annihilation”, gives some indication of the extent of the fear of atomic destruction among Plath’s contemporaries. In 1960, the opening of a new decade, Plath’s activism is a hallmark of the swelling tide of
disillusionment and resentment of international government. Plath's awareness of the military-industrial complex can be traced back to her high school years; an essay written as part of a history test on modern warfare solicits the following response from Plath:

The causes of modern wars in general may be classified under the following headings: navalism, militarism, imperialism, economic nationalism, secret alliances, newspaper propaganda, nationalism, neo-mercantilism. (This latter occurs when a nation furthers its private investments abroad and then promises to defend the rights of its private investors.) All these causes listed above promote the jealousy, greed and dangerous over-patriotic fervor conducive to modern warfare (Accompanying text, 'Eye Rhymes' Exhibit, 2002).

Written a few years prior to the Korean War, Plath's essay is a brilliant analysis of the roots of twentieth century war, and for one so young, shows a remarkable degree of awareness of the warped trajectory of military history. The backdrop to Plath's essay was an increasing public fear of the atomic bomb, a fear that began to encroach upon the American consciousness as concern for its effect upon the nuclear family crept into the writing of sociologists. Articles on the dangers of social disintegration began to appear regularly. An article by Charles Walter Clarke, a Harvard physician and executive director of the American Social Hygiene Association published an article in the Journal of Social Hygiene on these dangers. Clarke warned that "following an atom bomb explosion families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down. . . there would develop among many people, especially youths. . . the reckless psychological state often seen following
great disasters” ("Social Hygiene and Civil Defense”, Journal of Social Hygiene 37: 3-7).

According to Clarke, strengthening the bonds of the family could only abate the moral anarchy that would follow a nuclear disaster.

From the early 1950’s onwards a civil defence program was launched with the family as the prime focus. Women in particular were targeted as chief exponents of a program that gained its momentum from anti-Communist sentiments and a notion of the home as the centre of national security. Women were to act as a bulwark to the communist threat by encouraging traditional gender roles. Thus, it was implied that a traditional family, in which the woman remained at home, was likely to provide a safer refuge in the case of nuclear attack than a non-traditional home. A bomb shelter became a symbol of familial security, and articles in popular magazines encouraged alternative uses for the homemaker. Time magazine records the thoughts of one homemaker on the alternative uses of the bomb shelter: “It will make a wonderful place for the kids to play in. And it will be a good storehouse, too. I do a lot of canning and bottling, you know” (“Wonderful to Play In”. Time. (5 Feb 1951): 12). The bomb shelter as a symbol of security became inseparably linked to the home, where marriage, a reinforcing agent, strengthened the sense of security. Plath herself scorned what she called the “fall-out shelter craze” as a creation of a money-grabbing advertising industry whose profits, as she saw it, only supported further military spending (LH 438). Bernard T. Feld writing in The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, April 1962, described the bomb shelter craze and the entire civil defence program as merely a minor distraction from the real issue of nuclear disarmament. According to Feld, the civil defence program was merely a guise to whip up feelings of urgency in the American public; the real urgency, however, was in the pre-emptive strategies adopted by both
the Soviets and the Americans based upon mutual suspicion of military tactics. Such strategies were based on the rationale that, for America, nuclear weapons are "purely defensive"; however, faced with the subversion of the Soviets there remains the threat of attack "at the time of some crisis", and therefore, it becomes necessary to think preventively and launch a counterattack in the instance that the Soviets attack first (Grodzins & Rabinowitch 320). The "fallacies" of fallout propaganda were part of a campaign of political propaganda designed to arrest the attention of the American public whose support and interest were essential in arousing the concern of the Soviets. A strategy of fear and frenzy was in place that involved the American public in a campaign designed to off the Soviets.

In his Essays 1992-2001, Gore Vidal comments on the U.S. post-war acceleration toward a "militarized state" formed from "the old-fashioned closet of the original American Republic". This process, Gore observes, was unilaterally supported by the media whose "single voice" (in the words of Henry Luce, Time Inc. publisher, issued the message that "God had founded America as a global beacon of freedom" (qtd. Vidal: 174). Gore continues in his exposé of the roots of the "military-industrial" complex that came to dominate the Eisenhower era by citing the hugely illuminating National Security Council document 68 (declassified only in 1975). This document lists the procedures adopted by the Truman administration in the pursuit of a legitimate enemy for the newly formed militarised U.S. nation-state. These include the development of the hydrogen bomb, the build up of conventional forces, the mobilisation of the entire U.S. nation into a 'cold war' against the USSR by means of propaganda, loyalty oaths, and spy networks such as the FBI, and a deliberate policy of vilification of the soviet government from within the USSR itself (Vidal 176). This so-called Truman Doctrine was built upon the
observation by Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, that "the average American citizen" only spent ten minutes a day "listening, reading, arguing about the world outside his own country", and therefore, the activities of the administration was under no real threat of detection from a nation of "docile workers, enthusiastic consumers, obedient soldiers who will believe just about anything for at least ten minutes" (Vidal 169). At the end of the day, there was always fear and ignorance to secure the solidarity of the American people.

X: Cold War Fear: The Withdrawal into Consensus

Science over Nature

Fear is what consumes Esther Greenwood, closeted into a world where disease, death and decay threaten to extinguish her. Throughout The Bell Jar the image of the atom bomb hovers close to the surface, running like a seam through the novel. Death and destruction are the chief imaginative concern of young Esther Greenwood, the ultimate embodiment of which is the bomb. From the opening page the atom bomb conjures images of death: the Rosenbergs, proponents of the bomb are to be punished by death, reinforced by the image of a cadaver's head that Esther envisages floating "behind the head of Buddy Willard" (1). The imaginative correlation between the bomb and the experience of disease associated with Buddy Willard are forged by Esther early on, and stand as a commentary on the state of American science, of which the bomb and Buddy are both products. It is Buddy who exposes the eager Esther to the hospital environment, bastion of science and technology where babies who "died before they were born" are kept in bottles. It is also Buddy, in his capacity as doctor, who reveals to Esther the full
horror of childbirth whose full truth, he tells her, would dissuade her from choosing to have
children, and so the human race would end. In the hospital environment, Esther records the
natural process of birthing as something grossly unnatural. In such a place a mother becomes
nothing but a woman with “an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs”
caught in a stirrup, whose pain causes her to make an “unhuman whooing noise” (61). In
Esther’s mind nature is displaced by science and natural processes suddenly become “inhuman”
and, so, disturbing. In her “twilight sleep” the mother is the passive subject of science, just as
millions of humans, in the case of a nuclear war, would become. Esther’s preoccupation with the
‘evils’ of science reflects its occupation within popular imagination – demonstrated by Stanley
Kubrick’s 1964 film “Dr Strangelove”.

In a world dominated by the threat of destruction, metaphors of disease become
metaphors of life itself as life and death hang tenuously in balance. An image of a decayed fig
tree is a young woman’s vision of her life. In one instant the tree offers an abundance of life, of
opportunity: “From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and
winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous
poet and another fig was a brilliant professor . . .” In another instant the figs “begin to wrinkle
and go black one by one”; (BJ 38; 52) they fall to the ground and they opportunities they
represent fall with them. The image of the decaying fig tree echoes the tenuousness of a young
girl’s aspirations; it also echoes the reality of nuclear fallout whose effects would mean, in the
words of Buddy Willard, “the end of the human race”. In a 1959 article devoted to the benefits of
science, Eugene Rabinowitch implored the American government to pursue common scientific
interests for the good of mankind and so bring an end to the opposition of “the two power
camps” of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. What he called the “deplorable” dismissal of Soviet proposals for the development of thermonuclear energy and space exploration, was in large part responsible for the lack of positive developments in the field of science. Rabinowitch argued that it was the responsibility of the U.S. show “imaginative leadership” in respect to the advancement of science for the benefit of mankind, which, so far, had been lacking. According to Rabinowitch, a scientist of the atomic era, pure science meant “the acquisition by mankind of new power over the forces of nature” (Grodzins & Rabinowitch 283).

For Esther Greenwood, the advancement of science over nature leads to the experience of electro-shock therapy. The natural, if destructive process of disorder in her brain chemistry, is brought back into realignment by the intervention of an electric current. The chemical disorder of her brain is thus reconditioned, reprogrammed, re-harnessed by science. Plath’s description of the process suggests elements of brutality whose aim is punishment. A machine is wheeled out and Esther is ‘s trapped’ and ‘buckled’ to its brute force. She wonders “what terrible thing it is [she] has done” (BJ 138). Plath suggests that the power of the machine is greater than Esther’s own will, and so while the machine subdues her illness, it also strips Esther of her sense of self. The force of the machine repossesses Esther’s brain, the matrix of individual identity. In the sanatorium she meets Valerie, who has had a lobotomy (BJ 185). Valerie represents the ultimate subjugation of the machine over human will. Her entire brain has been reconditioned under the premise that it will make her more socially acceptable. The irony is that the new, lobotomised Valerie now has no desire to re-enter society: “I like it here”, she tells Esther. The lobotomy reduces Valerie to a passive, child-like self whose only wish is to remain that way.
Consequently, she withdraws from society for the refuge of the sanatorium, unable to face the challenges of adulthood or the modern world.

XI: The Breakdown Experience: Personal and Public Crisis

Withdrawal from society is central to the 'breakdown' experience. Esther’s overdose attempt takes her to a dark hole beneath the house, a place resembling a bomb shelter site in its location and purpose. As a place of refuge and reassurance, the bomb shelter was a symbol of family solidarity in the face of a terrifying world. One of the most popular symbols of the civil defence campaign was “Grandma’s Pantry”, a home bomb shelter designed to encourage self-sufficiency and readiness: “With a well-stocked pantry you can be just as self-sufficient as Grandma was. Add a first aid kit, flashlight, and a portable radio to this supply, and you will have taken the first important step in family preparedness” (qtd. May: 105). Esther’s withdrawal to the basement of the house resembles the procedure of the bomb shelter drill: in the midst of emergency (in the case of Esther, a personal emergency), this is a desperate resort in the face of an overwhelming world. The terror of personal disintegration, like the terror of nuclear devastation, leads to desperate measures. The ultimate symbol of the breakdown experience is the withdrawal of the individual from social bounds. Faced with the experience of nuclear war, society as a whole would be forced into complete withdrawal; so, the bomb shelter becomes the place of withdrawal in the same way that the suburbs are the place of withdrawal for the city. Esther’s removal to the suburbs is the beginning of the process of complete withdrawal, ending with the overdose attempt in the basement. The suburban family home is the first step in the retreat from society where neatly mowed lawns and standardised designs reinforce a comforting
predictability that modern city life cannot offer. In the civil defence campaigns of the late 1950's the bomb shelter was presented merely as a continuation of suburban family life, possible even in the face of nuclear war. By retreating to the basement Esther believes she is moving beyond the bounds of family life; in fact, she is merely exchanging one symbol of that life for another.

Like other cold war sociologists, Carl C. Zimmerman and Lucius F. Cervantes forged a connection between the role of the family and the cold war, placing emphasis on the family as the binding social force in the face of political dissolution:

Early in January, 1957, Russia exploded an atomic bomb, and American scientists monitored its fallout fission products. Non-stop simulated bomber flights in the upper atmosphere were now reported by the U.S. as travelling around the world in about forty-five hours. Trouble arose in the Middle East. Hungary broke into revolution. Then came Sputnik, space vehicles, and ICBM's and crash programs for training more scientists. The world is like a volcano that breaks out repeatedly... The world approaches this critical period with a grave disruption of the family system... The new age demands a stronger, more resolute and better equipped individual... To produce such persons will demand a reorganization of the present family system and the building of one that is stronger emotionally and morally (Successful American Families: 13).

If, as sociologists implied, the cold war threatened the security of the family, then the whole of American society was at risk of being affected. An anxiety rose to the surface in the
late 1950's with numerous efforts at diagnosis and prescription. Henry Luce, editor of *Time* magazine asked the question: “What are we trying to do overall? Where are we trying to get? What is the National Purpose of the U.S.A?” These questions, examined in an article by John W Jeffries in *American Quarterly* entitled “The ‘Quest for National Purpose’ of 1960”, diagnosed a “general disquiet about the course of the cold war and the character of the consumer culture”.

The whole notion of America’s quest for purpose, Jeffries argued, could be traced back to a “post-war sense of American power and mission” that culminated in the claim that the 20th century was in fact the “American century, the only threat being the Soviet advance in technology and weaponry. The launching of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, in 1957 reinforced this fear of soviet advancement, and for the first time the U.S. was faced with the thought that it might be falling behind in the struggle for world power. Blame for this was placed upon the new breed of Whyte’s ‘other-directed’ organization men whose chase after material glory had brought a distraction from the battle with communism (Jeffries 453). The ultimate American fear was realized with the visit of Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev in September 1959. Khrushchev brought with him a chilling threat: “In one way or another, we will bury you”, *Newsweek* reported to the American public (*Newsweek* 54: 34). *Time* called it “one of the grand confrontations of the cold war and of all time” (*Time* 74: 9-10). Walter Lippmann of the *New York Herald Tribune* (quoted by Jeffries) located the present weakness of the American society as a lack of unity in “great purposes”: “The public mood is defensive, to hold on to and to consume, not to push forward and to create. We talk about ourselves these days as if we were a completed society, one which has achieved its purposes and has not further great business to transact” (454). Sputnik and Khrushchev’s U.S. visit culminated in a sense of national urgency. This urgency, according to *The Atlantic* was to “force a great public discussion, all across the
nation and at many levels, on the nature of American society (Atlantic Nov 1959: 204). At the
dawn of a new decade America faced a crisis of purpose and identity.

The cold war had sent America off track and she needed to be recalled. Cold war
paranoia had been translated into what Life and the New York Times repeatedly described as
“excessive materialism, complacency, flabbiness, selfishness, apathetic and aimless affluence
and moral confusion” (Jeffries 457). Sensing the need for direction, Eisenhower drew up a list of
national goals - what became the “President’s Commission on National Goals”. This set of goals
was designed to bring a more distinct sense of national purpose and was largely shaped by cold
war concerns in order “to preserve and enlarge” American “liberties, to meet a deadly menace,
and to extend the area of freedom throughout the world”. So, the “great issues” of a generation
that had already passed were finally defined, and U.S. citizens could look back at a decade that
had brought them such insecurity (Goals for Americans: 2; 15; 18). Eisenhower’ goals reinforced
the lack of direction in American politics, and the nation as a whole, whose complacency gave
rise to the term ‘consensus politics’. Kennedy’s “New Frontier” campaign was able to capitalise
upon an era of consensus with his election in 1960, and his courting of big business was a
deliberate attempt to strengthen this consensus. His address to the National Industrial Conference
Board, 13 February, 1961 was executed in the language of consensus, which in business terms
meant the end of the separation of public and private domains: "in short, there is no inevitable
clash between the public and the private sectors – or between investment and consumption – nor,
as I have said, between government and business. All elements in our national economic growth
are interdependent" (Fairlie 240). Thus, the desultory mood of the nation became Kennedy’s
strength; the “feverish” mood of fear regarding soviet technology and nuclear advancement
became this ticket to power. Having lived through an age of consensus, the American public was willing and eager to swallow the promise of a renewed national purpose in order to gain in "unchartered areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war (Fairlie 21; 83).

The Bomb

The withdrawal into consensus came with the advent of fear. The fear itself came under the shadow of the bomb. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist captured one of the most potent symbols of that fear on it its front cover: a clock with its hands approaching midnight with a mushroom-shaped cloud in the background, international scientists attempted to stir the public to the dangers of the bomb. Writing in her first year at Smith College, 1950, Plath evokes the same image of a clock ticking as a symbol of the "quick, desperate fear" of the age. She imagines the invasion of the bomb into the placidity of Smith life, bedrock of New England middle-class intelligentsia:

... I wonder what would happen to us all if the planes came, and the bombs ... But the squirrels would still be there, and the birds. Long after, unless the smoke and the radioactivity (Oh Marie Curie, if you could know!) got them ... In the back of my mind there are bombs falling, women & children screaming ... I don't know how it will be ... But I do know that nothing will matter much – I mean whether or not I went to House Dance or to a party at New Year's. It is amusing to wonder whether dreams would matter at all, or "freedom" or "democracy". I think not; I think there would only be the wondering what to eat
and where to sleep and how to build out of the wreckage of life and mankind . . .
And so I will belong to a dark age, and historians will say "We have few
documents to show how the common people lived at this time. Records lead us to
believe that a majority was killed. But there were glorious men". And school
children will sigh and learn the names of Truman and Senator McCarthy. Oh, it is
hard for me to reconcile myself to this (Journals, Kukil: 32).

Plath imagines the course of history after the bomb. Smith, and its calendar of social
events will mean nothing in its wake as history ruthlessly eliminates a generation. Plath was
herself a victim of a campaign of fear that surged through the American media in the post-
Hiroshima years. This "politicization of terror", a term used by Paul Boyer to describe the
efforts of "atomic scientists, world-government advocates, and international-control advocates",
played upon the public fear in the wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings (Boyer 65).
Plath, responding to a headline in a newspaper regarding the nuclear testing in Nevada, dwells
upon the memory of Nagasaki:

... They're really going to mash up the world this time, the damn fools. When I
read that description of the victims in Nagasaki I was sick: "And we saw what
first looked like lizards crawling up the hill, croaking. It got lighter and we could
see that it was humans, their skin burned off, and their bodies broken where they
had been thrown against something". Sounds like something out of a horror story.
God save us from doing that again. For the United States did that. Our guilt. My
country. No, never again. And then one reads in the papers “Second bomb blast in Nevada bigger than the first!” (Journals, Kukil: 46).

Fear was an integral part of a young woman’s rite of passage in the post-Hiroshima years. Dating and dances were intermittently eclipsed by the fear of annihilation that the memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as presented in the media of the day, evoked in the popular imagination. The horror was further exacerbated by the advent of war in Korea five years on. Korea becomes an imaginative extension of the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Plath writes of the same “lizard-like humans crawling up a hillside” that described the victims of Nagasaki; thus, the victims of the Korean War are the same victims of the atomic bomb, at least, in the imagination of an 18-year-old American. She asks the question: “What will be left?” after the great superpowers have finished “atom-bombing each other?” From war in Japan and Korea, war will progress to the U.S. and leave the “mashed and “bloody trail” of an entire generation – Plath’s generation (J 46). In writing of her private fears of war and the bomb, Plath speaks for an entire public living under the shadow of the atom bomb where war is now a homogenous commodity, bringing the same nightmare. Born in a generation sandwiched between two world wars, Plath and her contemporaries had felt the keen closeness of war and learnt the cynicism of its participants. Tainted by the memories of their parents, “freedom” and “democracy” become ideas banded about in a fragile reality where war sits perched beneath the touch of a button, and the “great Roman Empire” of the U.S. falls apart (J 32). Articles bringing the reality of atomic war to the U.S. bombard the teenage Plath. A 1947 article from the usually placid Reader’s Digest magazine, “Mist of Death Over New York” describes the explosion of an atomic bomb over New York harbor immersing the city and its surroundings in a deadly cloud of radioactivity.
The article cites the deaths of 389, 101 “within six weeks”, a figure that includes suicides and persons killed while fleeing in “the worst panic known in all human history” (Boyer 66). In Life magazine, 1945, an article describes a “36-Hour War” in which a surprise atomic missile attack kills ten million American citizens. Life’s portrayal of this attack is coated with a layer of tantalising fear and fantasy: the enemy in unknown; the U.S. retaliates and is victorious despite its unpreparedness and its lack of anti-radiation gear. Any reader of the article is unlikely to have been convinced of the outcome, a cynicism reinforced by the accompanying illustrations of a razed New York City (Boyer 67).

Fear

This was a deliberate campaign of fear, orchestrated by atomic scientists in the hope that American society would renounce the prospect of war. It was based on the assumption that the ignorance and fear would coalesce into a preventive and numbing terror. In a chapter from his work, The Broken Connection, Robert J Lifton explores the place of the nuclear image and its corollary, death, within the history of mankind. In a note to this chapter, Lifton describes his work interviewing the survivors of Hiroshima and his observation of what he calls a “psychic mutation” in this group of people as they struggled to assimilate the idea of complete world annihilation. This idea, the result of external stimuli (the bombing itself) becomes associated with inner imagery of death experiences. Lifton concludes that this connection between inner and outer imagery was not restricted to the Hiroshima or Nagasaki survivors, but had become a constituent of all who had lived in the atomic age:
... all of us now constituted a "world of survivors". We lived in a world in which these two weapons had been used (whether or not we were alive or aware of the event at the time), and we were preoccupied with images of surviving (or not surviving) future nuclear wars. But it would have been more accurate to speak of potential psychic mutation. Surely our relationship to the universe has changed ... (Lifton 337).

Lifton continues with the idea that the human race as a whole is now struggling to create "workable new individual or collective forms" within the psyche that will carry the weight of a nuclear world. However, the tendency is to 'cling' onto "psychic structures we know" and try to ignore the need for new. Lifton calls this the "domestication" of the nuclear reality as he observed even with the Hiroshima survivors themselves who found ways to "tame the monster" that had caused them so much pain". So, the bomb becomes a "flash" or a "flash-boom" instead of the annihilator that it is (337).

Domestication of the bomb is demonstrated in the civil defence program that surfaced in the late fifties, a deliberate downplaying on the part of government agencies of the seriousness of the atomic threat. Richard Gerstell’s cheap paperback, How to Survive an Atomic Bomb (1950) became popular reading; its key message was "preparation". Gerstell relieved fear of radiation with a soothing approach to its dangers: atomic radiation could cause "burns" in large doses, but protecting oneself is "easily" done (Boyer 309). Gerstell’s book is only one of many examples of a policy of deception and distortion about the effects of the bomb. Control of public information regarding the bomb is illustrated in the case of journalist Wilfred Burchett who reported on the
events in Hiroshima following the atomic explosion. Burchett was in Hiroshima alongside an official team of Washington journalists, deployed to present the ‘official line’ on the story. Burchett’s direct observation of the effects of radiation were reported in The New York Times by William L. Laurence, head of the Washington journalists, as merely “Jap propaganda” (Boyer, 1998: 169). On the other hand, civilians were bombarded with what Lifton called “new” and “workable” forms of external stimuli that prepared them for a world capable of self-destructing. These agents of fear were proponents of international control of atomic energy, supporters of the 1946 Acheson-Lilienthal proposal, chiefly atomic scientists and nuclear control activists. As Boyer notes in his 1998 study of the American response to nuclear weapons, the scientists’ movement “initially rested almost wholly on fear”. Boyer cites the words of W.A. Higginbotham, member of the Federation of American Scientists who, in a 1946 New York Times Magazine article terrified the American public with the declaration: “you will be haunted by the overpowering knowledge that if war is declared, you, your house, or your business may disappear in the next second” (Boyer, 1998: 171).

What remained then, to comfort the “world of survivors” when fear prevailed? Plath writes in late 1950 of the “mental fear” of war, of her sheer “frozen” terror:

Let’s face it: I’m scared, scared and frozen. First, I guess, I’m afraid for myself . . . the old primitive urge for survival. Its getting so I live every moment with terrible intensity . . . I’ve got to have something. I want to stop it all, the whole monumental grotesque joke, before it’s too late. But writing poems and letters doesn’t seem to do much good. The big men are all deaf; they don’t want
to hear the little squeaking as they walk across the street in cleated boots . . . I
guess this all sounds a bit frantic. I guess I am. When you catch your mother, the
childhood symbol of security and rightness, crying desolately in the kitchen; when
you look at your tall, dreamy-eyed kid brother and think that all his potentialities
in the line of science are going to get cut off before he gets a chance . . . it kind of
gets to you (Journals, Kukil: 19).

XII: The Failed Existential Retreat

The only option that remained was retreat: emotional, mental and psychic retreat. Esther
Greenwood's suicide attempt is such a retreat; a withdrawal from a world whose collective
psyche is filled with images of destruction. Retreat from the collective, public domain becomes
essential for the individual psyche to survive. The popular theologian, Paul Tillich, addressed the
anxiety of the age and in his best seller, The Courage to Be, exhorted his readers to overcome
despair by drawing upon the power of “self-affirmation”, the power of ‘being’ in the face of
non-being. Tillich’s popularity rested upon his embrace of the existentialist movement that
characterized the mood of post-war culture in which religion had become nothing but “a
desperate and futile attempt to regain what has been lost” (Tillich 190). Existentialism,
according to Tillich, was an “expression of the anxiety of meaninglessness and of the attempt to
take this anxiety into the courage to be oneself”, an expression of the contemporary situation
(Tillich 139; 126). In the face of a collapse of the anthropomorphic God of popular imagination,
Tillich urged for a “God above God”, beyond imagination. In an age where imagination was
considered a risk (for fear of its result), Tillich proposed a God of “being” not ‘a’ being. In ‘being’ every finite thing was a participant, and therefore a participant of God, and God is transcendent in the “power of being” itself. In his cultural theology Tillich acknowledged the contemporary existentialist position, linking existentialist man to his Hegelian forerunner and the notion of essentialism. Tillich declared the existentialist crisis to be nothing more than man “in a state of estrangement from his essential nature”. Thus estranged, man has no sense of destiny, only a series of arbitrary acts that do not constitute true freedom; this in turn leads to a loss of individualisation and an inability to participate in the world “through perception, imagination, and action”. Ultimately, the individual’s subjective self begins to separate from objective reality, and so the objects of the physical world “swallow the empty shell of subjectivity” (Kline, 187: 207).

In New York City, Esther Greenwood undergoes the loss of her subjective self to the hollow objects of the editorial fashion world. Esther’s central anxiety becomes, what Tillich terms, “non-being”, as she slowly surrenders herself to the shell of the city. The city with its social emblems of status and success have inadvertently become the object of Esther’s self, her end-goal. Society replaces the self, and this, in turn, leads to a painful self-dismemberment via the experience of breakdown. Decentred, the subject no longer recognises itself; looking at her image in the mirror, Esther sees the face of a stranger, “a sick Indian”. The familiar self has been dislocated from its relation to the objective world and is erased. What Plath describes in her Journals as her “hollow futility” is Esther’s reality, and this leads to the decision of suicide. The existential anxiety of “non-being”, and the preoccupation with death that stems from that anxiety, induces suicide. The process of recovery that follows does not remove Esther from the
general experience of dehumanisation that characterizes her breakdown. The electro-shock therapy she undergoes is the ultimate act of dehumanisation; in the world of shock therapy, a machine and the individual, subordinate to its designs, encode being itself. Esther experiences recovery, the process of restructuring the self, in the context of non-being – the sanatorium.

Within the tribunal environment of the 1950's, the sanatorium stands as a symbol of the penalty of social disaffection. If Esther is to reintegrate into society, she must reconfigure her social self around those established institutions from which she has fled. Like Holden Caulfield, she is re-socialised by female role models - in this case by the sanatorium nurses (for Holden, by his sister, Phoebe) - into social conventions and structures. Esther's reprogramming begins at the close of the novel - as she enters the medical board meeting where her future will be determined, she experiences an involuntary force drawing her back toward familiar social configurations: "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (BJ 234). Esther's entry into the medical board meeting also signals a reintegration with her diachronic self aborted by her breakdown.

Esther's reintegration shatters the existential supposition that the source of one's existence is one's self. Merleau-Ponty's claim that the self is the "absolute source" of its existence, without recourse to its "physical and social environment" is a form of phenomenology that fails Esther (Warnock 75). The existential bid for self-determination is never met, and the form of self that she returns to is clearly socially determined. The dominant (and oppressive) social structures ultimately overwhelm Esther, and she retreats back into their familiar forms. Likewise, Salinger's
Holden Caulfield, although voicing his repulsion of the prescriptive code of contemporary male socialization, ultimately capitulates to their demands:

We'd have to go downstairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We'd have to phone up everybody and tell 'em good-by and send 'em postcards from hotels and all. And I'd be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels (Salinger 133).

Holden's tone is one of passivity, cynical resignation and retreat. Apparently, Holden and Esther inhabit a world where social taxonomies for the self are unavoidable, indeed, absolutes.

**Wilhelm Reich and Cultural Determination**

Underlying this cultural determination was the Freudian premise of biological difference between the sexes, responsible for the allocation of social-cultural roles between the genders. Psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich, a harsh critic of Freud, attacked what he perceived as a dangerous and futile binary opposition in the Freudian thesis between man's natural desire and cultural prescription:

...there is a sharp conflict between natural demands and certain social institutions. Caught as he is in this conflict, man gives in more or less to one side
Reich regarded what he called "human structure" as determined by the opposition between natural drives and cultural determination; the process, in effect, of socialization. Reich's thesis attacked what he termed the "ideology" of contemporary society whose Freudian creed recognized man's animal instincts (the 'unconscious') and sought to tame these instincts within the framework of social institutions and rituals. Reich concluded that this process of socialization precipitated a building up of a protective psychic "armour-plating", a necessary process indicative of man's internalisation of social mores and restrictions. This 'armour-plating' was thus, central to the formation of man's 'character structure' (Mitchell 186) and his psychoanalytic work voiced the disaffection of a generation with contemporary social "ideology" or structures. Disaffection leads to marginalisation: "illness or death" present themselves as final, but suitable, desperate exits.

Disaffection

The final Ariel poems are a testament to Plath's own disaffection from her contemporary social forms; indeed, Ariel is a complete revocation of these forms, and the result is an equivocal attitude toward life itself. Hence, in 'Paralytic' (CP 266-7), the image of the magnolia is the personification of self-denial: it "asks nothing of life" (CP 267). Passivity continues in the image of "a Buddha" whose "wants" and "desire" are willingly surrendered. Similarly, the passive voice
dominates 'Mystic' (CP 269), where activity is associated only with inorganic objects, not the self:

> Meaning leaks from the molecules.
> The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
> The children leap in their cots.
> The sun blooms, it is a geranium (CP 269).

We are reminded of the speaker's self-erasure in the final line of the poem as a symbol of self flickers across the poem like a dying coda: "The heart has not stopped". The "I" has dissolved, and with it, a sense of the self having resigned it's self to forces beyond its control.

> Resignation dominates the 1963 poems. 'Words' (CP 270) locates the speaker within a paradigm of fate: gone is the existentialist's self-determination; all that remains are the flow of words itself, and this, in itself, is involuntary:

> Words dry and riderless,
> The indefatigable hoof-taps.
> While from the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
> Govern a life (CP 270).

Here, the identity of the speaker fuses with that of the poet in a statement resembling an involuntary confession. Again, the voice is passive, and the tone, one of resignation. Self-control
and self-determination are forfeit to the emanating rhythms of poetry itself. Poetry - the creative act - defies the existential bid for self-government. While writing offers a retreat from the prevailing social forms - a somewhat maverick existence - the act of writing itself does not satisfy the existential demand for freedom. To the contrary, writing itself is merely another form of self-entrapment.

A Requiem to the Self

The final poems witness a gradual progression toward the alienation of the self from the central locus of the poem. The corollary of this is an ironic sense of self-observation, a reflexive self-watching from the parameters of the poem. So it is that Plath's poetry of the interior leads, ironically, to the self in a position of alienation and exteriority. The three poems following on from 'Words' demonstrate this position. 'Contusion' (CP 271) is a statement of complete resignation, a surrendering of the life force. The focus of the poem is the withdrawal of the speaker from her psychosomatic state, a process that involves a bifurcation of the psyche and the body. The result is emotional nullity:

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.
The final line resonates with a sense of submission to the inevitable. The inevitability is death itself, and in this sense, the final line can be read as a funerary image and the whole poem as a procession toward that point.

Following from this, Plath's final Ariel poem, 'Edge' (CP 272-3) reads as a death utterance, a requiem to the self. As in 'Contusion', the "I" voice has been withdrawn, and the speaker adopts the third person voice. Thus the poem's subject is no longer the speaker but "the woman" or a woman, whose "dead body" is the speaker's locus. The poem proceeds, ceremonially, toward a classical image of tragedy: the mother mourning her dead children. Funerally, the children are co-joined to the mother in death, re-entering the womb in a cycle of life-death. The female body becomes, itself, a locus of death, rather than life, a subversion of the romantic ideal. The poet encases the poem with Lawrentian motifs of romantic femininity, pre-Raphaelite in their cloying appeal. The ghastly attempt to diffuse the presence of death fails, only heightens its potency. The final image of the moon functions as an objective correlative for the missing self - yet another echo of its position of alienation and subordination. The moon is the poem's "sad" observer, "staring from her hood of bone". Her presence is a device to reinforce the macabre tragedy of the scene, and the overwhelming cynicism of the speaker herself. Her presence betrays self-consciousness apparent in all the final poems; a contrivance designed to increase the sense of a malignant fate operating beyond the jurisdiction of the speaker, to which she is beholden.

Thus, the locus of the self is an existential universe that does not grant the freedom of choice attributed to that stance. Within the prevailing social order (hegemonic and patriarchal)
there exists only one imago for the female self, and hence, rather than facing the lack of choice, the self retreats into death. Within the dominant social order, there is no place for a counter-identity. The 'new' self of The Bell Jar is nothing but the old self 'repatched'; the female self re-commodified, repackaged for the male market. Likewise, the self of the final Ariel poems does not produce a positive-imago: the personae of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy', 'Purdah' and 'Ariel', are attempts to circumnavigate the hegemonic, prescriptive imago of the acculturated 1950's female. Ultimately, the 'rebirth' of 'Lady Lazarus' is nothing but a theatrical device, a stalling of the inevitable, a retreat into masquerade and performance. Despite the liberation this masquerade brings, there is no stage exit from the dominant male economy; these performance poems are nothing but another example of the commodification of the female within that economy.

The existential bid for freedom cannot override the taxonomy of the self. It fails Esther as it fails the speaker of Ariel. The breakdown experience does not constitute a valid empirical experience within the prevailing social order; within this order it does not constitute 'being' but 'non-being' and so is relegated to the margins. What a Foucauldian analysis terms the exercise of "disciplinary powers" does not legitimise any marginal existence (Foucault, 1979; 138). Ultimately, those social mechanisms that constitute power, and to which the acculturated female is beholden, determine and impose the boundaries of the self. Beyond these, the self is null and void, removed from any sense of its own "drive", its own voice ('Ariel', CP 24).