CHAPTER FOUR
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I: The Existential Hipster: The Struggle for a Native Self

The devastation of the human psyche by the events of World War II is the starting point for Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro”. Written in 1964, Mailer describes as unfathomable the “psychic havoc” of the concentration camps and the atom bomb on the unconscious mind. Furthermore, the “mirror to the human condition” that made the war so hideous was of man’s own making, and man was now forced to face those questions about himself and his own nature. The consequence of the war’s atrocities in terms of the intellectual life was, according to Mailer, the post-war years of “conformity and depression ... a collective failure of nerve”. Mailer traces the emergence of the existentialist ‘hipster’ from the psychic wasteland of the war and the atom bomb. Living as he does now, with the imminent threat of death, contemporary man divorces himself from society, his past and his future. This is the condition of the modern hipster, an individual who lives only in the “enormous present”, pushing against the “rebellious imperatives of the self” (Sykes 171-2). Having accepted death as an inevitable fate, the existentialisthipster makes death the circuit board of his inner life; a reality that Mailer notes is marked with desperation. In order to live, the existentialist embraces death as his mantra and chief point of reference.

The work of Sylvia Plath’s Ariel poems gives voice to a self turned inward and a landscape where death is the principle feature. According to Mailer’s diagnosis, Plath’s writing is characteristic of the modern individual’s attempt to sublimate his feelings into an intense
outburst of expression. The term "expressionistic" seems loosely appropriate to describe Plath’s poetry, at least. Crucial to that definition is an inflated sense of self driven by an intensity of emotionalism that provokes the self to the surface of her poetry. The force of the emotional blast causes a complete deracination of the socialised, perfunctory self, and leaves in its wake, the unsophisticated, and primitive urge of the native self. Driven by what Mailer terms ‘accelerated tempo’ of history with its “reflexes and rhythms”, Plath expresses only the most extreme form of self, a self that again and again confronts the existential reality of death, driven from a horrifying past into a horrifying present.

Plath is too tightly connected to the past to be considered a hipster; nonetheless, she seeks an alternative to the “failure of nerve” characterised by her generation. Writing in 1962 of her years of schooling, Plath recalls the process of socialisation that brought each child within the “cherished norm” of the era, into which she struggled to assimilate herself, and which, in time, became something she chose to release herself from. The final sentence of her essay, “America, America” is directed at the artist of the present, not the child of the past. The author’s glance toward the First Aid cabinet where “soothers and smoothers for the embryo rebel, the artist, the odd” indicates the extent of the author’s removal from the “cherished norm” of her school days, and the present embrace of a more dissident self (JP 56). The social norm for a woman of Plath’s generation was a place in the burgeoning suburbs with all its assaults on the human spirit. Here, in the terms of Eric Kahler, the non-individual and functional self would flourish, while the “individually human self is left to wane”. The question of personal identity, then, is shelved at the expense of the one’s “commodity” value (Fromm’s term). Kahler’s essay, “The Tower and the Abyss” states the case of the individual’s alienation from his peers as the expression of self is
reduced merely to functional purpose (Sykes 89-91). Under such a regime, the violent eruption of self-expression characterising the writing of Plath and Sexton, for example, seems a natural corollary. If we view the emergence of Plath’s expressionistic style (a term less limiting than Rosenthal’s “confessional”) within the context of a) the post-war embrace of European existentialism and b) a natural reaction to the reductionism of functionalism, such a development would seem to be in the natural scheme of things.

The exposure of the native self, inherent in the art of Plath, Sexton, Lowell, and other so-called ‘confessional’ poets, has been regarded as a somewhat compulsive act, as is the act of confession itself. This compulsive self-exposure implies a certain lack of artfulness on the part of the poet; perhaps, even, that the poet is unable to govern his/her primitive urge to express that which otherwise would remain unexpressed according to the bifurcation of public and private selves. Theodor Reik’s 1925 study of confessionalism broadly defines a confession as “a statement about impulses and drives which are felt or recognised as forbidden”. These forbidden impulses, according to the public-private binary code, are released despite social restraints and psychic repression (repression in and of itself nurtured by social restraints), which thereby cultivate the desire to confess. The most common situation for confession is that of the psychoanalyst’s office in which the confession becomes “a repetition of action or of certain behaviour substituted by displacement and with different emotional material, as words must substitute for action” (qtd. Mclatchy: 247). The most potent ingredient in the confessional act is the narrative framework that is its vehicle. In a sense the narration is the libido of the confession, driving it forward, and enhancing its natural instinct to expose. Narration fuels the confession and exorcises those repressive elements of the psyche that held it in restraint. Narrative repetition
in turn allows both guilt and the desire for punishment to surface and so, according to Reik, the confessional act halts the progression of the disintegrating personality. Following confession, that part of the ego that was estranged, is now pulled back into place (Mclatchy 248).

The most powerful examples of the expressionistic ('confessional') style are to be found when the retrograde effect of the repressed psyche is most strong. In the case of Plath, this is demonstrated by a poem such as ‘Daddy’ (CP 222). The explosive power of the poem lies in the degree of repression that has been exercised over the emotional content, which, when released, creates a shocking ferocity. This ferocity is belied, however, by the fact that Plath chooses the juvenile rhythms of nursery rhyme with which to deliver her attack:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo (CP 222).

The repetitious nature of the rhythms acts deceitfully, and, like confession itself, serves to tranquillise some of the agitation of the occasion. However, nothing, in effect, can reduce the impact of such an outburst upon the reader. The combination of facile rhythms with brutal images reads as a violent and skilfully rehearsed tantrum. The compulsive energy of ‘Daddy’ with its deliberate reaching back through history to torture and genocide indicates the psychic cost of the poem to the poet. Plath’s sense of alienation not only from the human history but also
the personal history of her relationship to her father fuels her thrust into the recesses of her subconscious mind. As Anne Sexton noted the very act of writing, "is evidence of survival," reinforcing what she calls "ego-strength" (qtd. McClatchy: 248). Thus, a poem like 'Daddy' is a testament to the poet's self; not only that she has survived both the experience of reproducing the painful events of the past, but also that she has lived through those events. As Plath noted herself in her BBC radio reading of 'Daddy', the young girl-speaker of the poem must first "act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it" ("Notes", CP 293). 'Daddy' could be read simply as just another session with the shrink, but Plath's sense of an historical consciousness redeems it from such a reductive analysis. Furthermore, she does not seek the absolution of confession; on the contrary, she seeks vengeance on the memory of her dead father.

II: Psychic Debris: History and the Personal Self

The psychic inheritance of World War II is an obvious source for Plath when sifting through imagery of the subconscious. The fact that she lived through the reality of the war, albeit vicariously through her parents (who "slumped dumbly after work and frugal suppers over their radios to listen to news of the "home country" and a black-moustached man named Hitler" (JP 53), gives her some license to exploit its horrors in her poetry. This she does, impressively, hitting upon the most emotive image of the war: that of the victimised enslaved Jew and the ruling Nazi overlord. The expansion that history gives to the personal motif is significant, and so the metaphorical murder of the father figure that is completed in the final stanza of the poem also stands as vindication of the Nazi murder of the Jews. Admittedly, Plath's metaphors are entirely self-interested and some would say exploitative, but nevertheless, by opening up the personal to the historical, Plath immediately heightens the emotional stakes. Furthermore, it indicates to the
reader the level of emotional involvement of a woman of Plath’s generation in the psychic debris of the war.

Plath’s story, ‘The Shadow’ (JP 146-155), is set against the backdrop of the war where the petty events of childhood squabbles are interspersed with glimpses of the war’s horrors. ‘The Shadow’ is the child’s sense of evil in the world, developed and exaggerated by the rhetoric of the weekly sermon at the local church that spews pieces of stern morality her way. Apparently, this evil is responsible for the barbaric treatment of prisoners of war, the horrors of which she snatches from radio programs, comic books, and a war movie seen at a friend’s birthday party. Her mother’s attempt to conceal the grim realities of the war from her daughter only serves to heighten the daughter’s hunger for certain confirmation of that reality. The war movie deposits haunting nightmarish images of “sulphur-colored” prisoners of war held captive by “sadistic” guards that seep into the child’s waking world with a “hostile brooding aura”. The reality of war breaks into the quotidian world, as air raid alarms and evacuation become regular routines, while at nights, she confronts her parents’ “serious faces” listening intently “to the staccato briefs of the newscasters” like some prophetic source. This “phenomenon of evil” suddenly adopts a human face when her classmates label the child’s German speaking father as a source of this evil, and she learns her father is to be forcefully segregated with other German citizens somewhere “out West”. Evil thus becomes synonymous with German nationality, and the injustice of this sweeping classification forces an early existential crisis: “I don’t think there is a God, then,” the child concludes. This cruel awakening leaves doubt in her mind as to the integrity of those forces labelled ‘good’:
Prepared as I was for the phenomenon of evil in the world, I was not ready to have it expand in this treacherous fashion, like some uncontrollable fungus, beyond the confines of half-hour radio programs, comic book covers, and Saturday afternoon double features, to drag out past all confident predictions of a smashing-quick finish. I had an ingrained sense of the powers of good protecting me: my parents, even the police, the FBI, the President, the American Armed Forces, even those symbolic champions of Good from a cloudier hinterland – the Shadow, Superman, and the rest. Not to mention God himself. Surely, with these ranked around me, circle after concentric circle, reaching to infinity, I had nothing to fear. Yet I was afraid (JP 153).

Plath was a child of the war, and as such is drawn to its images of death and cruelty as a bee is drawn to nectar. The perverse relationship of Jew to Nazi is one such image that suits her poetic need, it being, perhaps, the most emotive combination of the war’s legacy. It is also the most potent symbol of the tortured and the torturer, and therefore a perfect catalyst for Plath’s expressionism. From this potent blend emerge poems such as “Getting There” (CP 247-249). Here, the poet merges with the Jewish victims in a complete synthesis of self and other, while the mental anguish of the encamped Jew provides the necessary source for effect:

How far is it?
There is mud on my feet,
Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam’s side,
This earth I rise from, and I in agony.
I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming (CP 249).

The “I” is at once the imagined self and the real self combined. The imagined self is the Jewish victim; the real self, the poet in command of her craft. The two merge to create the poetic self who, fully licensed, steps into the realm of the subconscious and undergoes transmutation. It is a process that involves the resurrection of old ghosts: the pain of a dead father, the sense of his betrayal, a reliving of the twilight zone of breakdown and self-disintegration. These old ghosts become puissant forces in the re-enactment process of the poem. The poem itself becomes a transitional moment, a moment of psychic re-engineering where the past and the present collaborate and a new self emerges from the alchemic compounds. This process is described by Plath herself in the final lines of “Getting There” in which the new self emerges Lazarus-like from the old:

And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby (CP 249).

As Anne Sexton observed, “inherent in the process is a rebirth of a sense of self, each time stripping away a dead self” (McClatchy 6). History, the spectres of the past, serves Plath well; from its ashes she ‘rises’ to claim its potent fuel for her poems.
History haunts Plath, and her poetry is the creative result of her engrossment in it. The image of the Colossus, the title of her first collection of poems, is the embryo of all her poetry with its attempt to glue together the broken fragments of the past. This impossible task, as Plath herself declares in the opening line of the poem of that name, is the source of the psychic energy that propels her poems from first to last. In order to crawl back through history, Plath reduces herself again and again in the images of her poems to forms of the lowest existence: an ant crawling through the shattered remains of an old idol, in the case of ‘The Colossus’ (CP 129-20); a “still pebble” in ‘The Stones’ (CP 136); ash in ‘Lady Lazarus’ (CP 246). The umbilical connection to the past is never severed, and Plath’s images of self-reduction underlie a desperate need to be part of an historical landscape. This landscape is the landscape of her childhood, of a buried self, accessible only by permeating the strata of memory and the subconscious. Only by burying herself again can Plath return to that lost landscape, and so death becomes a symbol of flight from the present to the past. The height of this psychic process of reburial is the death-scape of ‘Lady Lazarus’. Here, the self transcends death, and, like a waking mummy, is resurrected with the sheer purpose of gleeful vengeance upon the spectres of her past. So it is Plath makes a poetic claim over her past, sweeping that past into the present moment of the poem where she can hold it accountable. It is a moment of life-in-death, of complete saturation in images of the dead and gone, made living only by the continuity of the poet’s emotional involvement.

Like an archaeologist, the poet digs into the past and dissects parts of a buried self. In this sense, her poems are much like a burial site, a place she returns to again and again in the hope of finding another remnant of personal history. The frequent references to the poet’s physical
ontology are attempts to convince herself and her audience of her own immediacy, of the existence of a self that is separate from the historical self. Furthermore, Plath’s explorative ‘digs’ into the historical, particularly personal history, reveals a persistent desire to reconnect and re-enact the past with the hope that she may finally master its ghosts. In ‘All the Dead Dears’ (CP 70-71) the poet confronts visceral images of her dead kin that she interprets, in turn, as a threat to her visceral self. Images of death and decay, the process of history itself, loom as agents of decomposition: “the gross eating game”. Those decomposed particles of history float to the surface of the poet’s consciousness and “haul” her in. So it is then, that history resurfaces, and a film of historical particles surrounds the poet, a consciousness that includes the ‘looming’ image of her dead father (l.23). The image of the father is merged with the image of the sea as symbol of the poet’s sub-conscious. Plath acknowledges this fact in her diary where she explains the merger of the sea and its god, Neptune, the sea and its pearls, to the image of her father as “god-creator” and of her art, “sea-changed” from “the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine” (Kukil 381). ‘Full Fathom Five’ (CP 92-93) sees the buried father ‘washed up’ from his sea-grave, and the poet ‘flung out’ upon the tide of the past. The association of the dead father with the in-coming tide suggests a rhythmic influx and reflux within the poet’s subconscious that again and again ‘hauls’ the “old man” in. As Plath wrote in her 1962 essay, “Context”, this subject is “close[r] to the bone”, and therefore, the matter of “real” poetry (JP 65). The recurring image of the drowned father, (who is drowned in the fishpond in ‘All the Dead Dears”), and here, in Plath’s sea-change poem, the father’s image is brought in on the cold “wash” of the sea. It is a central motif in Plath’s personal mythology and carries with it the full weight of a lost and irretrievable past.
III: The Divided Self: 'Real' and 'Imaginary' Selves

The process of uncovering the past is central to the self-dissecting poetry of Plath. Plath's contemporary and fellow self-dissector, Anne Sexton, describes the process as that of “a reporter researching himself”. This reportage of the self relies upon material gleaned from the subconscious, “little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights [one] know [s] not of” (Colburn 65). The state of complete introversion that this process of self-reportage relies upon could be explained, and has been explained, by contemporary societal pressure to live according to exacting external stimuli. In his preface to the 1990 Penguin version of The Divided Self R.D. Laing refers to the normalisation of what he calls the “pervasive madness” of an era that intentionally seeks to make ambiguous the meaning of “sanity” and “freedom”. He elucidates:

A man who prefers to be dead rather than Red is normal. A man who says he has lost his soul is mad. A man who says that men are machines may be a great scientist... A little girl of seventeen in a mental hospital told me that she was horrified because the Atom bomb was inside her. That is a delusion. The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous, and far more estranged from ‘reality’ (12).

The political and social climate of the late fifties here described by Laing is one that has so infringed upon the individual psyche that boundaries between society and the individual are no longer apparent. This process of osmosis between society and the individual naturally leads to a greater reduction of individuality and individual identity.
Laing himself refers to the work of Sartre, who adapts phenomenology - Laing's preferred approach to the philosophy of consciousness. In his 1950's work, *The Psychology of Imagination*, Sartre writes of two "distinct" selves: "the imaginary self with its tendencies and desires - and the real self". According to Sartre, the imaginary and the real self cannot possibly exist: "At each moment our imaginary self breaks in pieces and disappears at contact with reality, yielding the place to the real self. . . . It is a matter of two types of objects, of feelings and actions that are completely irreducible" (qtd. Laing: 84). The so-called 'confessional' style rests upon an ambiguous tension between the personae of 'speaker' and 'poet'. In Sartrean terms the "real" self might be attributed to the "poet", while the "imaginary" self rests upon the role of the 'speaker'. The audience plays a key role in appropriating these roles by providing the intimacy necessary for their unveiling. Alicia Ostriker, writing of the deliberateness of the work of Anne Sexton, for example, denotes the significance of the audience as the very "condition" of Sexton's poetry; a body who "needs to need her" (Ostriker 160). The adoption of various personae is designed to mitigate the degree of personal exposure, and so John Berryman, for example, adopts the persona of "Henry" in his Dream Song Cycle.

Plath, introducing 'Daddy' on a BBC radio program, attempts to mitigate what is clearly a fiercely self-involved poem, by explaining it in terms of a dramatic monologue "by a girl with an Electra complex". The tone of her introduction strikes the listener as a straightforward session of psychoanalysis, with Plath herself in the role of analyst: "Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other - she has to
act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it”. Plath’s attempt to sound clinically detached is belied by evidence provided by other poems where the same constellation of images and theme are scattered. You cannot read “Daddy” without thinking of, for example, ‘Lady Lazarus’ or ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’. Plath’s apologia rests upon her knowledge of the social inappropriateness of the ‘confessional’ mode and the act of confession itself. As Paul Breslin notes in his chapter on “Confessional Poetics”, the act of confession involves a submission to the community to which one, by confessing, wishes to be reconciled. The confession itself produces information that, when released, will automatically prejudice the confessant against himself and his audience. However, when the confessant himself does not submit to the judgement of fault, then confession becomes an act of self-assertion, of self-disclosure, and a testament to belief. In turn, this becomes an act of defiance, a dispute over the entire act of confession itself (Breslin 47).

In a Satrean analysis of the roles of ‘speaker’ and ‘poet’, it is difficult to determine which personae carry more the responsibility of self-disclosure. If we are to believe the analysis above, then it is the ‘speaker’ in the role of a young girl who is most obviously involved. But is she merely a front? The ferocity of the poem betrays the ‘poet’. Plath is not merely involved in a clever piece of artistry; the experience of the poet herself leaps out from behind the mask of the ‘speaker’. The “awful little allegory” mirrors the “awful little” life. What matters here, however, is not to what degree Plath writes of her own life, but of the use she makes of the ambiguous relations between ‘poet’ and ‘speaker’. The shifting ground shared between the two suits her purpose perfectly. While seducing her audience into a state of intimacy through the self-disclosure of her speaker, she then blasts it with the full power of her poetic or “real” self. The
"real" self is discerned in those moments when an unadulterated expression of that kernel of being or experience, upon which the whole charade is based, blast through. However, Robert Lowell, speaking of his *Life Studies* explains what he calls the "complete flux" of the experience that is the basis for this 'confessional' piece. According to Lowell, the experience itself is not sealed within the poet's mind as a constant piece of history, as something to which the mind of the poet may reliably return for 'fodder'; rather, the experience itself alters over time to suit the immediate moment, and offers itself in the form that most suits the poet's current, creative condition. As Lowell himself admits: "There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave a lot out, and emphasise this and not that... I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem [is] something invented". Lowell confesses that the overriding motive driving his writing is the attempt to convey a verisimilitude of the experience, that the reader may be convinced "he is getting the real Robert Lowell" rather than a fake (Breslin 31). It is then, the struggle to convey a credible self for the sake of reader that motivates the reader, a reader who, Lowell assumes desires to encounter the "real" Robert Lowell. Verisimilitude, the poet in the guise of "real" self, but not actually appearing in the naked flesh, is what this confession of Lowell's amounts to.

We are thrown back then, to the fact that the self-revelatory style of Plath, Lowell, Berryman and Sexton could, in the final analysis, be something of a dupe. The fact that these poet's go so far as to blur the distinction between 'poet' and 'speaker', between "real" and "imaginary" self must rest upon something more than mere technique. In the case of Plath's introduction to 'Daddy', the thinly veiled attempt to play the role of analyst betrays a desire to deny the significance of the "real" self, the experience beneath the rhetoric. One must then ask to
what extent Plath’s sense of the social and literary climate, tepid in its embrace of the personal, led to the creation of alternative selves? In an interview with the BBC Plath demonstrates her consanguinity with “the new breakthrough” of the work of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, work that edges out the “taboo” subject of the “very personal and emotional experience”. Plath, in particular, expresses, with what amounts to relief, the camaraderie she shares with Sexton who also writes of being a mother and of the experience of breakdown. The “emotional psychological depth” of Sexton’s poems Plath finds to be “quite new and exciting”; something she welcomes as a show of support of her rather marginalized themes and style. The newness of Plath’s writing, her “daring”, according to Sexton in an interview, was the fact she was able to write “hate” poems, something she, Sexton, had never “dared” herself. Sexton detected an “insolence” in a poem like “Daddy” she had not seen before, an insolence that grew out of the “speech rhythms” of lines such as, ‘Daddy’, you bastard, I’m through” (Colburn 93-4). The colloquial and invective speech of ‘Daddy’ resonates like a diatribe on the part of a daughter against her father. It is a moment of utter catharsis, and seemingly, Plath’s explanation of the poem rings true: this is indeed an “awful little allegory” being acted out, a final psychic catharsis of the noxious past. Yet, the distance between Plath as ‘poet’ and Plath as ‘speaker’ is barely indiscernible; the two roll forward together as one big canon ball of rage. ‘Daddy’, of all Plath’s poems, comes closest to sheer hate, and no amount of clever masking or juggling of personae will disguise this fact. The emotional pitch of the poem leaves no room for the displacement technique of allegory; its rage rips through any such device.
IV: In the Face of Denial: The Confessional Style

The unmitigated anger of ‘Daddy’ cannot be defined as anything like a confessional. There is no hint of guilt in Plath’s delivery, no reconciliatory tone toward her audience, only a brazen exhibition of a naked self. This self is stripped of all vestments of appropriate socialisation; there is no care for the effrontery such rawness may cause, only the unrelenting, unexcused rhythms of its own anger and pain. As Sexton writes in, “The Barfly Ought to Sing”, her post-mortem piece on Plath, in poems such as ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’, “Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out with the image-ridden-darer” (Colburn11). In effect, she rips open the old modernist canvas of masks and personae, (whilst still claiming their usage), by which the poet would, with the help of Eliot’s objective correlative, displace his raw emotion.

Plath foregoes the highly trained circus tricks of Pound and Eliot, dismantling the mystic symbols of their trade, and forces the reader to confront the emotional source of the poem. Her poetry is religion without the mysticism; a form of iconoclasm that removes the remoteness of displaced symbols and, instead, points the way toward the origin of those symbols – a sheer emotionalism.

Such a degree of emotionalism is susceptible to suspicions of theatrical posturing and play-acting, and a poem such as “Daddy” is certainly not innocent of this. Also inherited from the modernist tradition was the belief that the artist, according to Pound, (quoted here by Breslin), was “the antennae of the race” and, in particular, “that a nation’s writers are the voltimeters and steam-gauges of that nation’s intellectual life. They are the registering instruments, and if they falsify their reports there is no measure to the harm that they do”. What
Pound implies is that the writer, sensitive to social development, is able to report back to the rest of society on their general historical direction, and that this reportage, in and of itself, is a tremendous responsibility. This “exceptionally acute receptivity” to the surrounding world (Breslin 51) enters into the work of the writer and the work itself becomes something of a document of the contemporary world. Plath’s Daddy then, can be read as a response to the zeitgeist of an era that has deliberately silenced the inner life for the sake of the preservation of decorum. Plath’s compulsive delivery of a more authentic self reflects, in the Poundian sense, a high level of social psychosis. The split between the well trained, well-governed social self, and the undisclosed unrefined inner self, has apparently become so great that the two can no longer be reconciled. In response to this split, society undergoes what amounts to a psychotic breakdown.

In his chapter on “The Poetry of Breakdown”, Geoffrey Thurley explores the consciousness of writers such as Plath, Sexton, Lowell and John Ashberry whose writing stood in counter defiance to the culture of systemisation of the 1950’s. Thurley attributes the “shrieks” of Plath’s ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ and the extreme imagery of such poems to a psychological crisis in which disorder, anarchy and anomie are the natural reaction to a society bent on denying such an experience. At the centre of this crisis are, what Thurley terms, the “gifted introverts”: the likes of Lowell, Sexton, and Plath (Thurley 85). In his Life Studies (1959), Lowell openly admitted to the experience of breakdown: “my mind’s not right,” he writes in ‘Skunk Hour’. Anne Sexton, in her epitaph to her collection of poems To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), declares it the business of the poet to dare “to inquire further” into the source of that breakdown. She quotes a letter written by Schopenhauer to Goethe:
It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles’ Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God’s sake not to inquire further . . . For Sexton, poetry is an opportunity to explore the nature of human suffering and thereby come to terms with her own (qtd. Mclatchy: 254).

Her poem, ‘For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’, from the same collection, is a response to the warning of her mentor, John Holmes, not to pursue a ‘poetic enquiry’ into her own suffering. What particularly offends Holmes is Sexton’s use of what she calls “language”, the language of poets and of psychotherapists. Diane Middlebrook defines Sexton’s use of the term “language” to mean “figurative language, the type used by schizophrenics and poets (Middlebrook 198). However, Sexton, describes her first encounter with this “language” in psychiatric care:

It is hard to define [this language]. When I was first sick I was thrilled . . . to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet . . . but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess!) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well . . . someone! And then, later, a while later .
Sexton’s “language” is the language of the ‘mentally ill’ as diagnosed by those social institutions familiar with such “language”. It is disturbing because it is not the language of quotidian use, but instead, a language of the marginalized, those members of society normally described as ‘psychotic’ or ‘schizophrenic’. It is the language of the subterranean, the visionary, the “madman and the poet”, and therefore, regarded as subversive. If, however, we prescribe to the Pound’s belief that the poet is the antenna of the race, and in his dialogue with society he is the one that observes social change, then it could be said that Sexton is merely presenting a language reflective of the current social condition - the language of social disintegration. Sexton declares the experience of disintegration to be something common to the collective. In ‘For John’ she reminds her mentor that the dark side of humanity is a collective, ubiquitous, and unavoidable part of being human. Ultimately, the universality of this experience, Sexton argues, justifies its expression:

I tapped my own head;
It was glass, an inverted bowl.

And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl
with all its cracked stars shining.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear
like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face (Sexton 34-5).

This defence of her "language" is, in fact, a defence of the whole raison d'être of the "very personal and emotional" poetry of the "confessional" genre. Inside Sexton's "inverted bowl" – a metaphor for her psyche – are the same demons or "cracked stars", of any human psyche; the only difference being that Sexton chooses to 'invert' her bowl through poetry and face those demons head on. As she tells Holmes, it is a reality that the human psyche is often not 'lovely' and the universality of that 'unloveliness' justifies its expression. The fact that Sexton expresses this universal unloveliness through the "language" of psychotherapy might make some readers uncomfortable, but for Sexton, psychotherapy was the door to poetry. Holmes condemnation of Sexton, expressed in a letter to Sexton's classmate and fellow poet, Maxine Kumin, rests upon what he calls her writing "so absolutely of herself, to bare and shock and confess". Holmes continues:

Her motives are wrong, artistically, and finally the self-preoccupation comes to be simply damn boring... [W]asn't it once understood that the whole intent of
writing the bedlam poems was to get rid of them, and to cure herself, to grow up, to become through writing poetry a mature and rich person?... As it is, she merely re-infec\textsuperscript{t}ts herself, and she doesn’t seem to know any better than to enjoy it (qtd. Middlebrook: 105).

The unhealthy protraction of personal neurosis of which Holmes accuses Sexton could be an accusation levied against the whole of the ‘confessional’ genre. The ‘reinfection’ that Holmes alludes to is brought on by the poet’s absorption with matters related solely to himself and his own well-being; in particular, the state of his psyche. Robert Lowell, after writing his \textit{Life Studies}, noted that, “Something not to be said again was said” and that he felt “drained” (qtd. Rosenthal: 67). The intensity of such personal writing, clearly, was exhausting. Unlike Anne Sexton, Lowell did move away from the “confessional” genre, as did W.D. Snodgrass, after \textit{Heart’s Needle}. Clearly, whatever purpose it served had been met. Perhaps, as Holmes suggests, there had been a “cure”, and the poet was now moving on from the intense preoccupation with himself to wider spheres of reference. For Sylvia Plath, the extremity of the ‘confessional’ genre became something increasingly desirable to her creative and poetic development. Unlike Sexton, the intensely personal style released Plath from the restraints of elaborate form she had been doggedly pursuing in her earlier \textit{Colossus} poems. Its narrow vision allowed her to tunnel into a past that haunted her and to throw off the raiment of convention for a more explicit expression of self. In the case of Plath and Sexton the expressionistic style of the “confessional” genre led both poets into the realm of psychotherapy and, thus, into a closer scrutiny of the self. For both poets this mode of writing must have offered some curative aspects, if nothing more than the opportunity for therapeutic purgation.
The act of confession, whether it is in religious or psychoanalytical terms, represents a place of transition that the confessant must pass through in order to stand on higher ground. Purgative in nature, the end-goal is some greater sense of integrity. The danger is, however, that the purgative quality of confession could in fact become a mode of being itself, and that the confessant, unable to give up what has become for him an automatic response to life, finds himself unable to quit the habit. The question might be whether this particular mode of writing lends itself to the process of, what W.D. Snodgrass called, the poetry of “becoming” (Snodgrass 53), or, whether it is a poetry of “being”. If the latter is the case, then we must ask why such a (in the words of Anne Sexton) “searingly personal” poetry came about.

The “searingly personal” poetry of Plath and Sexton would seem to be the inevitable consequence of a period, or indeed - in the case of Sexton - a life of intense personal and artistic introspection. Such poetry allows for complete absorption in matters related to the poet’s own life and personality that he is freed from the responsibility of seeking out wider frames of reference. This in itself is a poetic freedom. Plath, writing to her mother and brother of that period of personal outpouring that became the Ariel poems, describes the creative burst she is experiencing as resulting in some “terrific stuff” (LH 466). The daily poem she produced in this period following her separation from her husband marked the height of her creative output. The intense reality of her personal pain drove Plath on, blindly, into this gully of private reference from whose potent energy, the greatest of her poems emerged. These poems are the result of a period of psychological and emotional distress, and the poems themselves serve as source of relief to that distress. In this sense, the poetry is a form of therapy, and the poet, the self-
appointed therapist. Plath’s 'sickness' is personal and yet, on a larger scale, her 'sickness' is also representative of an era. The sickness itself springs from the refusal to address the personal, and so the personal festers and becomes infective. In a 1962 elegy to her mentor, John Holmes, Anne Sexton addresses the conflict between the 'standards' of an era and those of her “searingly personal” poetry. Sexton aligns Holmes with a “mild God” whose “timid” effects seek to maintain the status quo of poetry. The “whitewashing” of poetry by this mild God is the antithesis of Sexton’s own version of poetry. Her vision of a muse is a “tribal female who is known but forbidden”, and whose sensuous realism offers her readers something “excellent”, yet “wild” (Sexton 106-7). Sexton beseeches Holmes to let her “take you”; to surrender to her beauty, sensuality and wildness. This is female muse of the “searingly personal”, of the unfettered and the untamed; it is Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ who rises “out of the ash” and eats men “like air”. Like Sexton’s tribal muse, Lady Lazarus is a primal female, “a libertarian” in the words of her creator. As a muse, it is opposed to the conventions of Holmes' institutionalised and authoritarian poetry in which the disturbing realities of the personal are ‘whitewashed’ with a seemingly more tasteful criterion.

The 'Confessional' Space

The speaker of so-called 'confessional' poetry addresses his/her audience from a position of confinement, and from this position, the entire act of confession derives its teleos. In the case of Sexton and Plath, the confessional locus was 1950’s domesticity, a "private and confined space" identified by Jeremy Tambling as the space of "the prison, or madhouse . . .the confessional box" - a place of enclosure (Tambling 9). This "enclosure" is the necessary space of
the confessant, the pre-emptive condition of the confession itself. It is a space that necessitates 'confession', as Plath's 1962 poem, 'Lesbos' (CP 227-30) clearly demonstrates. The locus of the kitchen, whose prevailing entelechy is a disturbing "visciousness", is an ideal space for confession. The female speaker, confined to the domestic space - like the prisoner to the Panopticon in the Foucauldian discourse - has developed a language of her own: the language of one confined and subjected to the "operations of power" (Tambling's phrase) of the dominant social order. Subject to these "operations of power", the confessant begins to speak the language of his/her confessor - the language of the 'other'. Indeed, the adoption/adaptation to the language of the 'other' is essential to the confessional process; where the confessing subject is speaking, his/her speech is constitutive of the dominant discourse of the 'other'. As Tambling notes, the confessions "encourage an essentialist view of the self", a view that directly conflicts with the prevailing existential philosophy of the 1950's. The so-called 'confessional' style of Plath, Sexton and Lowell, hence, is a direct challenge to the non-essentialist discourse, a discourse that refutes the ontology of the self and its 'speech'. The essence of the 'confessional style' is the speaking, colloquial self pre-empted by an audience. Hence, speech is the crux of the confessant's identity, pre-emptive to his/her relationship to an audience.

V: Censorship and Therapy: The Need for Sincerity

The censorship of poetry, of which Holmes himself was a part, can be seen as a part of the general climate of censorship of post-war America. Until the late 1950's the academic seat of American life was Columbia University, New York City, from which institution President Eisenhower, also the University president, founded his American Assembly and commissioned
the publication of the national policy document, "Goals for Americans". With the publication of this document, Eisenhower gave proof of his desire for a national consensus of domestic and international policies, and the vehicle for his propagation of this consensus was the American university. American academia thus became, in the words of Geoffrey Hodgson, "thoroughly integrated into the life and purpose of the nation" (Hodgson 91). Consequently, poets turned to the universities for their audience where matters of 'taste' and national culture were determined, and the academic poetry of Richard Wilbur, John Hollander, W.S. Merwin and Anthony Hecht, for example, flourished (van Hallberg 34). The poets of what Paul Carrol termed the "extreme situation": Plath, Sexton, Lowell, can be regarded as the natural and somewhat inevitable counter-product of the academicism of the 1950's. W.D. These poets were champions of the 'sincere' experience and its expression. In one of four "Personal Lectures" entitled "Finding a Poem", W.D. Snodgrass lays out what might be a manifesto of the 'sincere' poem and its disciples:

I am left, then, with a very old-fashioned measure of a poem's worth – the depth of its sincerity. And it seems to me that the poets of our generation – those of us who have gone so far in criticism and analysis that we cannot ever turn back and be innocent again, who have such extensive resources for disguising ourselves from ourselves – that our only hope as artists is to continually ask ourselves, "Am I writing what I really think? Not what is acceptable; not what my favourite intellectual would think in this situation; not what I wish I felt. Only what I cannot help thinking." For I believe that the only reality which a man can ever surely know is that self he cannot help being, though he will only know that self through
its interaction with the world around it. If he pretties it up, if he changes its meaning, if he gives it the voice of any borrowed authority, if in short he rejects this reality, his mind will be less than alive. So will his words (Snodgrass 32).

Snodgrass’ reworking of a poem for his daughter (what became Heart’s Needle, vi) is outlined in this lecture from an earlier draft to the final version, deemed by the poet to be a “better poem” because it was ultimately “more personal and so more universal”. In choosing to write about his daughter, Cynthia, Snodgrass was altering direction of contemporary American poetry. Snodgrass was himself emerging from a background drenched in the influence of the symbolists, a poetic style that insisted upon the preservation of complex masks to veil the speaker, and of which Eliot’s The Wasteland is the ultimate manifestation. Heart’s Needle was the result of his time at the University of Iowa writers workshop: “the most sterile of sterile places, a post war, cold war midwestern university” in the words of one of his teachers, Robert Lowell. Snodgrass broke away from the “symbol-laden” poetry of the modernists, much to the chagrin of his mentors whose advice was to stop writing such “tear-jerking stuff” (Boyers 163). Snodgrass was spurred on by the example of a fellow poet called Robert Shelley, whose “simple, direct, lyrical style” had him “floored”, as it represented the kind of poem “all the critics were saying you couldn’t write because our age was too fragmented or complicated or something”. Shelley’s style became ‘marketable’ following his suicide, and what had “only begun”, now went “on to develop” into a legitimate style (McClatchy, 1975: 283). The development of that direct style came with the development of the poet’s sense of self which, for Snodgrass, meant therapy. Through therapy, Snodgrass trained himself to find a sincere language that matched the
sincerity of his personal experience. In a letter to JD. McClatchy, Snodgrass describes the process of his apprenticeship to this language:

Or to say the same thing another way, I began to notice that one of the two of us in the room sounded like a psychiatry textbook and it wasn’t him . . . Anyway, all this led me to question the tone and subject matter of my poems. I was surprised to notice that my doctor wasn’t much interested when I talked about those abstractions; he sat up and took notice when I talked about my daughter. He wasn’t inclined to question me about those things where I could sound impressive . . .

I’d gone into therapy because (partly) I’d not been able to write for two years. I recall that my doctor specifically asked me if that wasn’t because I wasn’t writing about things I cared for enough about to get me past the resistance.

I might also comment that some years later I went into deep analysis in Detroit. That, of course, affected my work in ways that were less obvious (if perhaps more far-reaching) (qtd. McClatchy, 1975: 286-7).

The progression towards sincerity of self-expression in therapy spills over to effect a more sincere poetic expression. Through the rigours of therapy -its gleaning process of the self—both patient and poet emerge with a more grounded version of themselves. Therapy, then, was one of the poetic training grounds not only for Snodgrass but also for the other chief exponents of the model of sincerity: Plath, Sexton, and Lowell. For Plath, therapy sessions were designated
‘work’: “Worked and worked with Beuscher” (therapist), she writes in her Journals, “: the skip of a week gave me courage and momentum: stayed awake whole night before thinking what I have come through and to” (Kukil 478). Plath’s description suggests the same kind of honing process as Snodgrass sets out above. The crucial phrase here is “what I have come through and to”. Clearly, the ‘work’ of psychotherapy is in enabling its subject to recognise and embrace the finiteness of his or her experience, and then, to progress toward a transcendence of those same experiences. The subject of therapy will always be in a position of vulnerability, having entered into an arrangement involving the surrender of his social self for the sake of the personal. Likewise, the “confessional” poet places himself at the centre of his poetry and embraces the personal mode for the sake of sincerity. Exposed thus, the “confessional” poet speaks to the psychological vulnerability within all of us, of an entire age; and the poem itself becomes a form of therapy.

Robert Lowell, in an interview with A. Alvarez, makes the comment that an “artist’s existence becomes his art. He is reborn into it, and he hardly exists without it” (qtd. Bell: 8). Lowell’s own experience of therapy following a ‘breakdown’ led to Life Studies of 1959. Published the same year as Heart’s Needle, Lowell’s work threw up the struggle of his private life: alcoholism, family history, the deterioration of his mental health and repeated hospitalisations; truly, then, the artist’s existence becomes his art. Like Snodgrass, Lowell’s Life Studies are poems of “becoming”, or as Plath writes of her therapy sessions, of coming “through and to”. What he is in fact “coming through and to” is a more naked, honest self. ‘Skunk-Hour’ is the ultimate moment in this process of unveiling, and in-between the lead-up to this most “confessional” of Lowell’s poems, are strewn fragments of poetic and personal honesty. The
section entitled “Memories of West Street and Lepke” evokes the poet’s feeling of anomie. His statement, “These are the tranquilized Fifties/ and I am forty” suggests a dissonance between the poet’s sense of self and the prevailing norms of the era. The disassociated imagery of the poet’s memory of “hardly passionate Marlborough Street” confirms this sense:

“hardly passionate Marlborough Street”,
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a “young Republican” (Life Studies: 99).

Lowell’s “scavenging filthy . . . young Republican” is a strange anomaly of a figure, and yet he exists, albeit it as a paradox. The homogeneity of the fifties, as Lowell remembers it, included even the most unlikely subjects or, perhaps, victims. Even Lowell’s ‘Czar Lepke’, a titled sanatorium resident, is surrounded by vestiges of that great and universal American culture:
“a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American/ flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm”.
Yet Lepke himself is part of the living dead: “Flabby, bald, lobotomized,/ he drifted in a sheepish calm,/ where no agonizing reappraisal/ jarred his concentration on the electric chair - / hanging like an oasis in his air of lost connections”. In Lowell’s America even a lobotomised murderer, with his “lost connections”, is drawn into the homogeneous pattern of existence. Lepke himself is an embodiment of the stupefaction of homogeneity, a man whose intelligence has been destroyed and who lives, unknowingly amongst the deadness of a political permanence, echoed in the words of the Secretary of State - John Foster Dulles’- “agonizing reappraisal”. The world
of the mentally ill, those for whom therapy was not enough, are scattered through Life Studies as a reminder of the ultimate extremity of the disassociated state of breakdown. For Lowell, the world of the reputedly sane fuses with the insane, and so, ‘In Waking in the Blue’ there is Stanley, sanatorium attendant, whose reading material is The Meaning of Meaning and is merely a caricature of what is deemed to be ‘normal’. The poem begins with a series of dislocated images; indicative of the fragmented reality of the speaker whose world is alien to him:

Azure day

makes my agonised blue window bleaker.

Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.

Absence! My heart grows tense

as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill (Life Studies: 95).

The world of the speaker lies on the inside of the window, a place dominated by mental anguish, whose private reality is exacerbated by the knowledge of a public world “bleaker” than his own. The public and private worlds of the speaker both ‘petrify’ and terrify him, and like the worlds of the ‘sane’ and ‘insane’, their realities overlap. Like the remote Stanley, Lowell identifies with the experience of the insane posing as the sane, “cut off from [the] words” to describe his condition. The “extreme situation” that we confront in Life Studies warrants an extreme expression, and what Lowell, in effect, confronts us with is the condition of breakdown. At the centre of this experience is a sense of dislocation from the reality of the world and whose corollary is complete withdrawal from that world.
Lowell’s idiom suggests an illusory quality that shifts back and forth between the state of so-called ‘madness’ and that deemed to be ‘normalcy’. It is not the ‘sincere’ language of Snodgrass - a language extracted from the therapist’s chair – but a more veiled crepuscular expression of the loss of one’s sense of self. In the words of Esther Greenwood: “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream . . .” (BJ 227). The breakdown experience denies the individual the words to describe his condition. This wordless condition necessitates some form of therapy whose aim, apparently, is to excavate for the elusive words that will then enable the individual to transcend the experience. Part of the process of this ‘word excavation’ is a form of poetry that attempts to mitigate the experience and softens its blow. It is an outburst of expressionism in the midst of a desert experience.

In her Journals, Plath describes the process of writing as therapy: “Fury jams the gullet & spreads the poison, but as soon as I start to write, dissipates, flows out into the figure of the letters: writing as therapy (Kukil 413-14)? Her poem ‘Tulips’ echoes Lowell’s ‘Waking in the Blue’ in which both speakers find themselves in a hospital confronting the void where once was a self:

I am nobody . . .
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to
The surgeons (CP 160-61).
As for the speaker of Lowell’s poem, the speaker of ‘Tulips’ experiences physical and emotional petrifaction, as, lying in bed, a victim of the medical institution she passively accepts their procedures:

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water . . .

They bring me numbness in their bright needles . . . (CP 160).

The passivity of the speaker suggests a willingness to co-operate in her state of “numbness”. There is an automatic quality to the poem that is not apparent in Lowell’s poem, as if the speaker herself were ‘drugged up’, and the words, a product of this state of mind. In this sense the poem seems artless, a reflection of the unilateral reality of the speaker whose world is devoid of the complex surfaces of human existence. Plath writes of the freedom of having shed these surfaces:

. . . I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free –
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you.
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets (CP 161)

The abnegation of social defences appears to be part of the condition of the “confessional” mode, and having surrendered these, the speaker is left only with the personal “I” with which to face his audience. This form of nakedness allows for moments of tremendous existential
awareness, as in Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’, probably the most ‘confessional’ moment in the whole of his writing:

I hear

my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,

as if my hand were at its throat . . .

I myself am hell;

nobody’s here (Life Studies: 104)

A sense of personal “hell” has so overwhelmed the speaker that, existentially, nothing else seems to exist: there is nothing but this “hell”. Lowell does nothing to mitigate his experience of “the season’s ill” as his affinity to the image of skunks, rooting through a pile of rubbish at the bottom of the food chain, suggests. As a reader, we are forced, uncomfortably, into the experience of Lowell’s personal “hell” whether we like it or not. The fact is that there are no doors closed between poet and reader, and this awkward space we share with the poet offers no relief: there are no places left to hide. We meet the speaker’s pain head-on, and it is not comfortable. The poet, by refusing to mitigate the experience and the extent of his emotion, in turn refuses the reader the right to distance himself from that experience. In a sense, the extremity of emotion becomes a weapon with which he attacks the neutrality of the reader. The distance between poet and reader dissolves, and as a reader we are obliged to surrender our neutral role and become more partisan. This is, in fact, the poet’s very intention.
The contact between ‘confessional’ poet and reader becomes, in the words of Alice Ostriker, “imperative” (Ostriker, 1979: 464). Ostriker’s applies this term exclusively to female poets and the themes of “mutuality, continuity, connection, identification, touch” that dominate. It could, however, be applied to ‘confessional’ poetry at large with its tendency to create a tactile and intimate relationship with its readership. Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ (CP 244) and ‘Daddy’ (CP 222) draw the reader into a forum of self-confrontation and self-regard. Faced, in the opening line, with the shocking fact that the poet has “done it again” (i.e. almost killed herself), the reader shrinks from such brutal confessions; but, the jaunty delivery of such proclamations proceeds relentlessly:

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well (CP 245).
Plath’s glib syntax only heightens the fullness of the tightly held rage it belies. There is control, but no distance, and a terrifying sense of nonchalance toward death. Plath’s aplomb defies the mysticism of death, treating her subject only with the severest pragmatism. Plath’s intense self-regard is in keeping with Muriel Rukeyser’s call for “No more masks!” and with Ostriker’s observation that the female poet’s turn inward allows her to “define [her] self as authentically as possible” (Ostriker, 1979: 454). What is more certain, however, is that Plath’s stance is contrary to the poetic trend of the 1950s in its abstinence of self-regard. The academicism of the “New Criticism” as advanced by John Ciardi, one-time poetry editor of Saturday Review, promoted the idea of a poem as “a machine for making choices”. His How Does A Poem Mean championed a formalism inherited from Eliot and Pound whose chief aesthetic was a poetry of eugenics with each line of the poem carefully selected for its contribution to the “integrity” of the poem. Similarly, Cleanth Brooks in The Well Wrought Urn evokes the metaphor of the poem as a construction of opposing tensions and forces, “fixed by the artist’s use of paradox as the verbal means of resolving these tensions” (qtd. Molesworth: 320). This academicism can be explained by the new influence of the university in the political and social life of the nation. As Geoffrey Hodgson notes in his chapter "The Ideology of the Liberal Consensus", the rise of the American liberal ideology of the 1950’s was centred around the university, as academics became advisors to the business of government. This interaction however, was limited to the interests of the governmental patrons, and intellectual consultation became a matter of meeting the demands of government interests. In the case of poetry, the university was another primary fosterer of talent, and came to be regarded as the seat of poetic authority with a reigning set of rules.
As Charles Molesworth notes in his essay, “Contemporary Poetry and the Metaphors of the Poem”, the chief aesthetic of this type of academic “set-piece” was of an object “so hemmed round with ironic deprecation, so often reliant on allusion to other poems, and so internally consistent . . . so well “brought off” – that it demanded explication before experience, analysis before assent”. The assumption was that the poem was an object, self-contained, “autotelic”, with no room for disclosure of poetic intentions (hence, the “intentional fallacy” was a central tenet of this type of severe formalism) (Molesworth 320-21). Regarded as a timeless object, the poem had no cleavage to cultural or historical influences, but remained fully autonomous, beyond the need for any kind of dialectic.

The extreme self-regard of Plath’s mature poetry scorns the tendency of formalism to negate personality or any form of external referencing beyond the poem itself. Contrarily, Plath places the ego squarely at the centre of the poem and thereby creates a vortex of energy that agitates the entire poem to life. Without the extreme assertion of the “I” voice that dominates the body of Ariel there would be nothing of consequence, none of the density of the “searingly personal” experience that is the source of her power. For Plath, the ego was the principle vehicle of poetic expression, a hand on the pulse of the inner life, the life force. It was not an adolescent indulgence in emotion for its own sake, but a source of poetic empowerment in which the restraints of formalism were shrugged off for the sake of poetic authenticity. Plath’s validation of the personal during an era of abstinence amounted to a tremendous release of tension caused by such prolonged denial. The power generated from this release readily converted to the type of extreme expressionism favoured by Plath and her contemporaries. In a sense, by placing the self
at the centre of poetry, Plath was attempting to redress the balance in a culture that had swung too far toward the formal. In his New Poets, M.L. Rosenthal concludes that the centralisation of the speaker’s psychological condition is in fact “an embodiment of his [the speaker’s] civilization” as a whole (Rosenthal 79). In other words, the confessional poem was a psychic barometer for society, and an indication of the state of personal crisis widely experienced.

VI: The Deadly American Dream

The hysteria of Plath’s personal agony resonates with a fierceness that is larger than her own pain. Furthermore, she imposes a deliberate restraint, the irony of a colloquial style that delivers her pain in the form of a ‘chat’ to herself. In the opening lines of ‘Death & Co.’ (CP 254-5) she introduces an intensely schizophrenic reality of death with a casualness that catches her reader off guard; it is not until we reach the end of the poem that we realise the full implication of this ‘double’ image of death:

Two, of course there are two.

It seems perfectly natural now –

The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded

And balled, like Blake’s (CP 254).

Plath’s aplomb is, in a sense, a dupe. The full horror of her intentions are disclosed in the final lines which amount to a personal threnody:
I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell,

Somebody's done for (CP 255).

The false innocence of these nursery rhyme lyrics only increases the sinister irony encasing Plath's theme and the entire poem. Beyond this, there is a disturbing ambivalence toward death that belies a deeper bitterness toward life, an irredeemable despair.

The prevalence of death in Plath's mature poems seems incongruous in one so young; yet it consumes her poetic imagination. Her monstrous vilification of life naturally directs her toward death, and the latter poems of 'Ariel' see the speaker repeatedly donning a death mask. What is obvious is that Plath's death-filled vision of life is utterly incongruent with the vision of the American Dream and its belief in the triumph of the individual over any extenuating circumstances. Apparently, the Dream failed the young Plath, despite its prevailing modality during the decade that saw the burgeoning of Plath's youth and young adulthood. Nonetheless, she contemplates the reality of the Dream and what it could offer her as an alternative to the dream of the artist. In her Journals she expresses how "horrified" she is to find herself "voicing the American Dream of a home & children", as if this somehow annuls the possibility of
achieving artistic success. She tailors the conventional Dream to fit her own; “my visions of a
home, of course, being an artist’s estate, in a perfect privacy of wilderness acres, on the coast of
Maine. I will no doubt be an impractical vagabond wife & mother, a manner of exile.” Then, as
if to apologise for the inclusion of the Dream in her speculations, she chastises herself and insists
that she work toward a greater capacity for self-containment, loosening herself from any
associations with the Dream: “I must work for an inner serenity & stability which will bear me
through the roughest of weathers externally: A calm, sustaining, optimistic philosophy which
does not depend on a lifelong address within easy driving distance of an American supermarket”.
She continues with the declaration that she has her “own dream . . . and not the American
dream”, and that her particular kind of “wifeliness” has “no rules” (Kukil 411-12). Plath betrays
an “anxiety of influence” that compels her toward an alternative vision of the American Dream.
Meanwhile, as if to escape the universal suffocation of the Dream, Plath escapes into a
subterranean world where she can act out a defiant, macabre alternative. The ubiquitous Dream
is of no comfort to her “Disquieting Muses”.

The rhetoric of the American Dream with its privileging of the limitless possibilities of the
individual was chiefly an economic and a male vision. Its claims did not apply to the mid-
century American female, for whom its promises would always fall short. The female was an
accessory to the Dream, but she was not a protagonist. As the speaker of ‘Paralytic’ declares:
Dead egg, I lie/ Whole/ On a whole world I cannot touch” (CP 266). Aware of the unattainable
nature of Dream, Plath took pleasure in perverting its rhetoric, converting the drive for a
privileged life to the drive for death. Her poem, ‘Ariel’ (CP 239-40), is the transmutation of that
death-drive. The poem is pummelled into shape by a tension between the exhilaration of the life
force and the drive toward death. The opening line suggests the suspended tension of both – “Stasis in darkness” – before the break of day brings with it the speed and muscularity of life:

Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.
God’s lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees! – The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch, (CP 239)

The speaker is embedded in the life and movement of the horse beneath her, energised by the sheer physicality of the experience. The horse and speaker fuse together – “How one we grow” – as the life force fuels a kind of reckless desire to seize the full potential of the moment. Satiated by an explosion of physical energy, the language progresses toward the sensual and the orgasmic:

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks –
Black sweet blood mouthfuls . . .
And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall (CP 239).

A predatory, male force looks on at the rising tide of female desire – "Nigger-eye/ Berries" that "cast dark/ Hooks" - with looks of envy. The intense movement of 'Ariel' is indicative of the struggle of the female for a truer self-representation, apart from the male gaze. The dark underpinnings of American society are based upon a tremendous restriction of the female, a containment of her power. 'Ariel' celebrates the release of female energy from the sexual and political containment of the American capitalist regime. This is a vindictively female poem, a revenge upon the male forces responsible for her containment. Sadly, revenge becomes a self-destructive enterprise, and the autoeroticism of the female rider and horse ends with the dislocation of the speaker’s physical self:

Something else
Hauls me through air –
Thighs; hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel –

Dead hands, dead stringencies (CP 239).

The ejection of the rider signals the end of the drive toward life, and the moment of orgasm being consummated – “And now I/ Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas” – the speaker turns to the language of victimisation: “The child’s cry” and the helpless movement of the suicide turning toward death:

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning (CP 240).

The elevation of the rider becomes the degradation of the suicide, as one form of energy is consumes another. The rapid take-over of the death-drive suggests the susceptibility of the speaker to its lure. Death presents itself as an appealing alternative to life where life has failed to meet personal expectations; or the expectations that life metes out are incongruent with personal desire. And who or what is to blame for these paralysing expectations? In her Journals Plath lays blame at the feet of her mother and society. She writes: “It is my mother and all mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the
society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images”. At the heart of her anger is the ubiquitous Dream: “What do they seem to want? Concern with a steady job that earns money, cars, good schools, TV, iceboxes and dishwashers and security First.” And yet, there is the need to live out the security that the Dream offers to its citizens: “And yet we are scared. We do need money to eat and have a place to live and children, and writing may never and doesn’t give us enough. Society sticks its so-there tongue out at us” (J 437). Thwarted by a desire to uphold the Dream, at the same time Plath is driven by an artistic obligation to abhor its homogeneity. The Dream is at odds with the core of artistic identity - as ubiquitous as the Dream itself - the legend of the individual. The struggle to assert her sense of individuality, to free herself from the codification of society - these are the essential efforts of Plath’s definition of herself both as a woman and an artist. Furthermore, this process is at the heart of her poetry and its dramaturgy - in the tension between the drive toward life and death that is the principal action of the poet-speaker.

VII: Let’s Blame Mother

Plath blatantly lays the blame for the spread of Dream ideology upon the mother. The mother figure was a potent force in the cold war years, central to the domestic policy of the era. As Michael Rogin notes in his essay "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood and Cold War Movies", the role of the mother was to create a familial haven, a place of refuge from the threat of deviancy, of which the communist ‘other’ was the most alarming. The cold war, and Betty Friedan’s phenomenon of ‘The Feminine Mystique’ identified as a policy of domestic subordination of the female, was synonymous. Yet, with the female occupying the a central place
on post-war domestic policy, including the responsibility for the moral direction of the home, fears arose that the extent of her influence had exceeded itself; indeed, had become a corruptive force. Philip Wylie's bestselling novel, Generation of Vipers (1942), attacked the mother figure, or 'mom' as a "self-righteous, hypocritical, sexually repressed, middle-aged woman" who "got men to worship her and spend money on her". Wylie declared America to be "a matriarchy in fact if not in declaration" and preached a deadly propaganda of blatant chauvinism, anti-communism, and nuclear armament as a means to combat the subversive influence of the American matriarch (Wylie 51-3; 318-20). In Wylie's novel, Tomorrow (1954), the mother is the provocateur and source of the bomb, and Wylie's chief target. Wylie's horrific and absurd denouement sees the novel's three mothers and their children destroyed by nuclear war: the first hacked to pieces; the second, saved only by the destruction of her baby; the third, crippled by the blast and wheeled through the streets in a wheelbarrow (Wylie 296-7; 329-30; 259-60). In all three cases, Wylie depicts a savage dismemberment of the body of the mother figure. Rogin perceives a perverse association in Wylie's reasoning between women and destruction, the invasion of boundaries, and an essential lawlessness.

Rogin's essay examines the subversive role of the mother in cold war films, many of which identify the mother with the threat of communism. The mother is perceived to be an infiltrator of staunch state boundaries, something she achieves by sexual seduction. Rogin identifies the maligned mother figure as an indication of the incipient paranoia of the cold war era, and the obsession with blaming and shaming sources of deviancy. As Rogin notes, the family, state, and society at large formed 3 layers in what he terms a "progressive domestic anxiety" (245). The central motif of these films is the destruction of patriarchal control of the
state by an external (usually female) source. In *My Son John* (1952), Helen Hayes plays a flirtatious mother whose relationships with her son, John, borders on the sexual. The film implies that the liberalism and sexual promiscuity of the mother have determined the character of John, anarchist and rebel. In particular, the mother's lack of boundaries is responsible for the deviant behaviour of her son. Helen Hayes' character becomes increasingly 'mad' as her "waywardness" from a respectable American conservatism leads her toward mental breakdown and 'deviancy'. The film exploits the recent Judith Coplon spy case: John is himself a spy and betrays his mother for another, female spy. Ultimately, the film is a feeble psychoanalysis of the roots of communism, and an attempt to locate the source of communism within the family (Rogin 250-52).

Similarly the 1962 *Manchurian Candidate*, starring Laurence Harvey in the title role, sees the protagonist in charge of a battalion of men who are carried into China from Korea where they are brainwashed by Chinese communist soldiers. During the brainwashing sessions, Harvey's men suffer hallucinations, and are convinced that their communist captors are, in fact, middle-aged 'club' women. Harvey's character is controlled by what he believes to be a female persona of the Queen of Diamonds. This gender power-struggle is set against the backdrop of another mother-son relationship in which Harvey's mother - played by Angela Lansbury - controls her son within an incestuous relationship that includes communist indoctrination. Lansbury's character also controls her husband, a character based on the political figure of Joseph McCarthy. The family saga sees all three characters elected to top positions within the communist party until Lansbury, convinced that her son has become a political instrument for the party itself, vows to turn traitor. Following party orders, Harvey is brought into a plot to kill the party
president, but instead, mistakenly kills his mother and father instead. *The Manchurian Candidate* locates the source of the communist threat within the mother figure, and its subordinate relationship to maternal influence (Rogin 253). Rogin concludes that the domestic anxiety of the cold war years was generated by the rise of the family as the central motif of American life—a place of privacy and intimate relationships. However, the significance of the communist threat led to an increasing influence of the state in the private life of the nation, and the impenetrable nature of the American home itself became a cause for anxiety. The 'Feminine Mystique' of the cold war years was founded upon the belief in the "sinister power of women", and hence, the state undertook a policy of domestic containment in order to restrict the female sphere of influence. So, the boundaries of the home were watched with increasing anxiety as a space in which politically deviant ideas might prosper. The domestic space thus "dissolved political into personal problems", and attention shifted away from the public arena to the private (Rogin 60).

In *Ariel*, Plath increasingly defines the home as a place of horror, a place in which the incompatibility of the female to her roles as mother-wife provokes the high drama of a classical tragedy: domestic tragedy.

**Domestic Horror**

Plath's awareness of the incompatibility of the artist-individual to his era leads her to into a situation of tremendous vulnerability. As an artist, she is forced to confront the question of her own compatibility, a question that induces in her poems such extreme realities as that of Hiroshima and Auschwitz. The extremity of these realities is an indication of the extremity of her sense of anomie from a society in which she viewed herself as “victim, killer, and the place and
process of horror all at once” (Rosenthal 87). This anomie is also transferred to a domestic entelechy. In ‘Lesbos’, (CP 227-28), domestic comfort is usurped by a jarring and exterior reality, a sinister place of duplicity and inauthenticity:

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors –
Stage curtains, a widow’s frizz.
And I, love, am a pathological liar, (CP 227)

The speaker is trapped in a domestic deceit, a reality so warped she must become “pathological” in order to survive. Her child is also implicated in this pathology:

And my child – look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear –
Why she is schizophrenic,
Her face red and white, a panic, . . . (CP 227)

The child is symbolic of the condition of the mother and the entire domestic situation: together, they mirror the disassociation of the other. The presence of another female only adds to the experience of disassociation. Lodged into the dynamics of a dysfunctional family, she is the
thorn in the side of the speaker, the predatory female, who lurks among the ruins of a family for her prey – the speaker’s husband. Ironically, she is the most disassociated figure in the poem: a barren woman – “you have blown your tubes like a bad radio/ Clear of voices and history, /” – whose husband withholds himself from her – “You say your husband is just no good to you/ His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl”. As women, both embody an experience of anomie that seems indicative of a certain form of prescribed womanhood. Apparently, this formula – a traditional one, based upon the production and maintenance of a family - has failed them, and there is a sense in which both women exist only by dint of an induced phantasmagoria:

Meanwhile there’s stink of fat and baby crap.
I’m doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites,
Our bones, our hair (CP 228).

Only by retreating into an opiate state can the speaker survive the experience of contemporary womanhood; only by numbing herself to its precepts can she fulfil them. The ‘sturm and drang’ of the speaker voices the experience of Plath’s generation, a generation that had outgrown the prevailing models of socialisation – those of their parents’ generation – and were now in search of the new. Meanwhile, subject to the demands of a form of socialisation that left them personally barren, young women of Plath’s generation fell into a coma.
Shockingly, the mother labels the child of 'Lesbos' as "schizophrenic", a term that reflects more the entelechy of the mother-speaker than the child itself. The trope of mental illness springs from the violence of the domestic institution, the "viciousness" and 'hissing' of the female trapped within meaningless domestic rituals. Plath's domestic scenario has something of a cinematic quality, the quality of a horror film: “It is all Hollywood, windowless, / The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,/ Stage curtains, a widow’s frizz” (CP 227). The child is a "puppet" in a cruel and bizarre reality, the desperate domestic plot of the 1950s housewife-mother. The speaker is engaged, antagonistically, with an absent "you", the butt of her frustrations, and the source of her predicament. This "you" acts as an external/societal agent without whom the speaker is rendered socially and personally incomplete. This ontological dependency explains the speaker's hellish entelechy, one that rests upon the opposition of personal desire and social prescription. The "stink of fat and baby crap" is the reality arising from a collective denial of the inner life. While Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' is, literally, an exhibition of the avenging persona of femininity, 'Lesbos' situates the feminine persona still trapped within the stultifying reality of domesticity. Private space is synonymous with good mental health, what Britzolakis calls "immunity" from the contaminating influences of socio-historical forces (Britzolakis 1999). For the speaker of 'Lesbos', the form of a frustrated and duplicitous femininity (whose corollary is psychotic breakdown) has filled this space. The 'schizophrenic' reality of the speaker is rooted in the fragmented nature of female identity, an identity wholly dependent upon the presence of 'other'. In the absence of other, the identity of the female becomes forfeit.
The agent of otherness, the "you" persona, is a haunting presence in Plath's mature poetry, a persistent reminder of the strife-ridden dialectic of self and other: "I" and "you". The imperious presence Plath's "I" stands, literally, as a towering defence against the encroachment of the other. The self, subject to the rule of the other, overextends herself in an attempt to rescue the subjugated, private self; it is an extreme measure requiring an extreme delivery, and hence, the language of the _Ariel_ poems. The most extreme example of such overextension of the subjective self is Plath's 'Daddy' (CP 222-224). The cruel interplay of self and other is apparent in the first line; a perverse dual governed by the rhythms of the subjective voice in pursuit of the elimination of the other: "You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot (CP 222). This is an aural assault against the other, a process in which the subjective voice hurls back the phonetical identity of its counterpart: 'ou', 'o', 'oo'. It is a case of supreme abjection: the elimination of those phonetic elements considered wasteful, superfluous and a threat to the purity of the subjective "I". Literally, this is the murder of the identity of the other, whose presence, up until now, has defined and determined the existence of the self. The battery of assault continues with the mocking projection of the German second person pronoun "du". The speaker continues to encroach upon the territory of the other with the formidable guttural sound of the German first person pronoun: "Ich, ich, ich, ich". The aural effect is, to say the least, belligerent, and by now, the presence of the "I" persona is so aggrandised as to make the second and first person pronoun interchangeable. Hence, the line, "I thought every German was you" (CP 223). Having seized the language of the other for its own, the subjective voice continues to humiliate its opponent with a range of bullying tactics - reducing the identity of the other, linguistically, to baby-talk:
I have always been scared of you.

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat moustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer man, O you - (CP 223).

This "gobblydygoo' reduces the agent of otherness ("you", or "Daddy") to an object of ridicule and puerility. In a tribunal fashion, the "I" voice confronts the other with its history of tyranny:

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you (CP 223).

This is a direct accusation of the injustice suffered at the hands of the other in respect to the self, an entire history of the exploitative dialectic of self and other. To conclude, 'Daddy' is a journey through, what Christina Britzolakis calls, "the violent logic of othering": the struggle for self-differentiation, a self-representation distinct from other. The interplay of "I" and "you",
subject and object relies upon an unstable, shifting dialectic of the poem's subject. Plath exploits the uncertainty of the subject to convert "you" (oppressor) to "I" (victim), and vice-versa (Britzolakis 190). Thus, "Jew" becomes "Nazi" and "Nazi", "Jew", in a bizarre ritual of specularity and role-play. Plath's technique panders to a sense of the perverse, the subversive, the illogic of a deviant phenomenology. In the Bahktinian schema, the dialogue between self and other is an essential component of meaning; meaning itself is constructed only through interchange, an address and a response, whose purpose is to transcend cultural demarcations (Tambling 177).

The relationship of self and other is hinged upon demarcations of social rank. Thus, the female self in relation to the male other is located within a praxis of dependency, a relationship governed by a fundamental indebtedness or answerability. What this constitutes is a form of confessionalism, a dialogue in which the dependent female subject exposes her private self to the judgement of male authority. According to Jeremy Tambling, the confessional discourse is one in which the confessant is 'interpellated' by name and "made to define themselves in a discourse given to them" (Tambling 2). As Tambling notes, any confessional approach to the self is essentialist, and therefore, a confessional discourse between female self and male other, reductive. What has been termed the 'confessional' style of Plath's poetry involves a dialogue with self and other in which the self turns its gaze inward, not for the sake of naming the errors of its nature to the other, but, as a means of turning away from that gaze. In 'Daddy', Plath exploits the confessional discourse to suit her poetic purpose, and hence, the confessant (the female voice) masquerades as the voice of the male other - the 'Daddy' or "you" persona. What this amounts to is a merging of self and other, a kaleidoscopic overlaying of subject and object.
with a deliberate blurring of the boundaries of each. In this syncretic process, Plath achieves her aim: to disturb the notion of a unitary self or subjectivity and exploit the idea of the specular relationship of self and other. More importantly, she enjoys the act of masquerade itself in which self plays other and vice-versa - a technique central to the successful 'performance' of 'Daddy'. Ultimately, Plath's masquerade subverts the status quo of self and other, rewriting the dialectic of self and other in favour of a more coalescent intercourse.

IX: The "Mad Ones": 1950's Disaffection

What has been termed the ‘extremist’ approach of Plath and her contemporary ‘confessionalists’ seems only fitting with the zeitgeist of the age. During an era in which ‘madness’ and ‘breakdown’ were taboo vocabulary, Plath, Ginsberg, Lowell, Sexton, and others placed the theme of insanity and breakdown at the centre of their work; their logic: that in a world gone mad, the only appropriate response was madness itself. The implication was that the ‘madness’ of the individual was the result of the ‘madness’ of the world - the contemporary culture of post-war America. In an article for Partisan Review (1974, Marge Piercy writes of the “death and madness” that young women of her generation were encouraged to believe was the fate of any woman who strayed outside the perimeters of their narrow socialisation. She poses the question: “How could we have believed that when we saw the toll of death and madness inside the roles”? Anyone who strayed outside these social “forms” was deemed “sick”: “if you were angry, if you were different, strange, psychic, emotional, intellectual, political, double-jointed: you were sick, sick, sick”). Piercy’s own writing lacked an appropriate audience; to be writing poems and novels that centred on the mythology of women during the 1950s was “to be
mad, objectively irrelevant”. The conclusion drawn was that for a young woman to be writing without a "context" she had to be "objectively mad" (Piercy 119; 124).

According to Piercy’s observation, the themes of death and madness that dominate Plath’s later poems clearly belong in the realm of what was regarded contemporaneously as “sick”. ‘Poem for a Birthday’ (CP 131-36), recalls the experience of electric shock therapy described in The Bell Jar, a process in which society aims to salvage a deranged mind. Plath’s flippancy is all the more disturbing, the subject of the process, the speaker herself, involved more in an amateurish science experiment than a severe medical process: “Now they light me up like an electric bulb. / For weeks I can remember nothing at all” (CP 132). Plath’s rendering of the reconstitution of the self following breakdown is nightmarish and implicated in this nightmare is a society to which the “sick” individual, the speaker, is connected in a deadly fashion, as she is connected to the waves of electro-convulsive energy. Like the heroine of The Bell Jar, the speaker of ‘Poem for a Birthday’ recalls the experience of her treatment as something punitive, thereby echoing the federal government’s decision to electrocute the Rosenbergs – an event that haunts the heroine in the novel’s opening paragraph and throughout. The experience of breakdown and ‘madness’, then, is not confined to personal sphere; rather, as in the case of Esther Greenwood and the speaker of ‘Poem for a Birthday’, the personal becomes a public matter in which intervening bodies take upon themselves the responsibility of salvaging a disturbed mind. The deranged individual is a state liability; the more deranged the individual, the more urgent the need to remove him/her from the public precinct. As Esther notes, “the more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you” (BJ 154).
Esther finds herself a subject of the state in a process that Louis Althusser has termed the process of 'interpellation' in which the self becomes a construct of state subjection. It is this process of designation Esther finds herself struggling against while in New York City, a designation that, when rejected, leads her spiralling toward breakdown and into another, less favourable designation, the mental institution (Smith 220). These designations leave the self with an identity it cannot fully own. Under these terms, selfhood becomes something alien, superimposed. The voices of *Three Women* variously articulate this sense of an imposed selfhood. The Second Voice, having lost her baby, expresses her passage back to selfhood in terms of loss: the loss of her femininity, (usurped by a sense of physical flatness) and a sense of vacuity, a searing whiteness that acts as a whitewash over her former self. These images of flatness and whiteness are a reflection of the clinical male jurisprudence of state authority to which she has surrendered her identity as - literally - she has surrendered her baby. This Second Voice views herself in the mirror as an emissary of the hospital environment, an interlocutor who confronts the reality she herself cannot:

This woman who meets me in the mirrors – she is neat.

So neat she is transparent, like a spirit.

How shyly she superimposes her neat self

On the inferno of African oranges, the heel-hung pigs.

She is deferring to reality.

It is I. It is I –

Tasting the bitterness between my teeth (CP 184).
The presence of this interlocutory keeps the Second Voice on the periphery of a true experience of herself: a “heroine of the peripheral”. Similarly, the Third Voice expresses her identity in terms of damage and self-estrangement:

I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go (CP 184).

Both voices are in the process of a rebirth of the self, a self emerging from the precincts of an institution with the form of that institution at the base of their identity. “I am myself again,” the Second Voice declares as part of a programmed response to her initiation into a new identity, the response of one convincing herself of the validity of this identity. Thus, the identity of both women is inextricably connected to the identity of the authority that has processed her, and the “confessional” voice becomes a vehicle for the struggle to wrest a true identity from the imposing grasp of society and its bodies. With no gap between public and private realities, identity itself is determined by the prevailing strength of each. In the case of the three women of Plath’s poem, the prevailing influence is the mechanism of public authority whose heavy-handedness wreaks damage over the life of the individual. The existence of the individual, then, is defined by the extent of public interference. In the meantime, the individual is a subject of the Establishment, whose impositions, in the words of Marge Piercy, lead to “alienation, hostility, craziness, schizophrenia (Piercy 127). This “craziness” is a natural response to the asphyxiating effect of the Establishment, a source of creative release, which, in the case of Plath and some of
her contemporaries, was the fuel for writing itself. Jack Kerouac’s hero, Dean Moriaty, in his novel On the Road, aligns himself with the disaffected members of ‘50’s society, “the mad ones”: “The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like stars across the stars” (Kerouac 11). Madness itself becomes a source of wonder and inspiration, the momentum for survival in a stifling social climate.

Mechanistic Madness

Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, 1956, is an exposé of the devastation of the sensibility of the younger generation by the Philistinism of the older. Ginsberg deems the “madness” of the established order that is its ungermane methods and principles, to be responsible for the psychic unravelling of many of his gifted contemporaries:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by

Madness, starving, hysterical naked,

dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn

looking for an angry fix,

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly

connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery

of night . . . (Ginsberg 9).
Ginsberg's universe is hostile to the sensitive: the poets and the artists. For these gifted sensibilities there is no "ancient heavenly connection" to the tradition of mysticism, no Blakean prophet to champion imagination over reason, nature over machinery and bureaucracy. Moloch of Part II of Howl is Ginsberg's rendition of the atrocities of the mechanical world upon the contemporary human spirit. Essentially, Moloch is the result of the insensitivity of modern civilisation whose brutality wreaks havoc upon the sensitive individual:

What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open
their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?
Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!
Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!
Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the cross-Bone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows!
Moloch whose buildings are judgement! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! (Ginsberg 17)
Moloch is the monster of the mundane, the routinisation of modern life with its institutionalisation of the pursuit of wealth and acquisitions. Moloch is the condition of modernity: the end of imagination, art and spiritual betterment for the sake of law and reason. Moloch’s “stunned governments” have lost all sense of the individual, overwhelmed by the demands of corporate culture. Consequently, the individual is sacrificed, an entire generation of individuals, for the sake of the corporation. Ginsberg’s repeated scream is tinged with the same aggression toward modern life as Plath’s cries of personal anguish. While Ginsberg’s incantatory style is more inclusive than Plath’s, including a catalogue of human body parts, of personal events, places, social classes, and politics, both are shaped by the experience of a modern anomie inherent in their art. While Howl is sweepingly rhetorical in style, nonetheless, the personal travesties attributed to Moloch seep through the universal. There is a personal vehemence and referencing that cannot be ignored as the poet brings together the particular events of personal crisis within the larger scheme of an entire culture at crisis. In his introduction to Howl, Williams points out the pattern of personal allusions that point to a more subjective understanding of the poem, in particular, to the poet’s own experience of the hell he calls ‘Moloch’. From his reading Williams deduces that the poet himself has “from all the evidence, been through hell”, quite “literally”. Williams continues: “On the way he met a man named Carl Solomon with whom he shared among the teeth and excrement of his life something that cannot be described but in the words he has used to describe it. It is a howl of defeat. Not defeat at all for he has gone through defeat as if it were an ordinary experience, a trivial experience” (Ginsberg 7).
The pain of the individual is transferred to the pain of an entire people, the entire American subconscious. As Mikal Gilmore recalls in a tribute to Ginsberg, Ginsberg sat down to write of "his lost loves, his found loves, the discarded people of America, the discarded promises of America, the fear that was just behind him, the fear that lay ahead for all" (qtd. George-Warren: 235). This synthesis of the personal and the universal make the pain involved in both more palatable. Ginsberg is successful in fusing the events of his own pilgrimage through pain with the pain of all who are outcast, lost, and mentally ill: all those who have suffered some form of marginalisation. At a time of renewed social conservatism in which the traditional model of family life and a drive toward patriotism moved the country away from the throes of socialism (viewed as a form of communism) Howl gnawed away at the very heart of American civilisation. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti was arrested for publication of the poem on grounds of obscenity, Judge Clayton W. Horn presiding over the case ruled that the poem was not obscene because of its social comment. Horn's summation of the case testifies to the germaneness of Howl:

The first part of Howl presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements in modern society destructive of the best qualities of human nature; such elements as are predominantly identified as materialism, conformity and mechanization leading to war. The third part presents a picture of an individual who is a specific representation of what the author conceives as a general condition... "Footnote to Howl" [the final section of the poem] seems to be a declamation that everything in the world is holy, including parts of the body by name. It ends in a plea for holy living (George-Warren 235).
The mechanised dystopia of Howl flickers through several of Plath’s mature poems. As Christina Britzolakis notes in several of the Ariel poems, the nightmare world of Howl, of “institutional or bureaucratic violence”, of a reality “wholly organized and administered” threatens to erase the identity of the speaker (Britzolakis 150). In ‘A Birthday Present (CP 206-208) the speaker engages in a direct relationship with a mechanised “you”: an “adding machine” that she addresses in the lyrical and personal style of confession:

O adding machine –

Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?

Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can (CP 207).

The speaker declares her utter emotional dependency upon this machine: “There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me”. This statement of need and desire is reiterated throughout the poem, and we are reminded that the implacable force of the machine governs the speaker’s emotions. Similarly, in ‘The Applicant’ (CP221-222) the speaker engages in a satirical dialogue with a mechanised female, a “living doll” – here, an “it”, rather than a “you”. Playing the part of an advertising agent, the speaker addresses an imaginary “boy” the stereotypical Fifties male, and lists the attributes of this doll-wife:
Well, what do you think of that?

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,

In fifty, gold.

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

This is a savage attack on the social marketing of the female as a commodity that “works”. Plath associates the process of selecting a marriage partner to the corporate process of partnership for profit (“But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver/ In fifty, gold”), a process that grotesquely reduces the female to a list of marketable or unmarketable parts:

are you our sort of person?

Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch?

A brace or a hook,

Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
The commodification of the female echoes the values of a commodified society whose systems are directed toward exchange-value of goods for capital gain. As a mechanical appliance, the female is an item for consumption, and inherent in that process is her evaluation of her marketability. The female “doll” is a public commodity to be exchanged on the public market, to be assessed and consumed by the male corporation as (in Britzolakis’ term) a “commodity-spectacle” (Britzolakis 151). Having been claimed as public property, the female has no access to a personal or inner life; instead, she remains marooned from her private history and all sense of interiority.

X: “To Talk in Public as we Talked in Private”: A Cultural Breakthrough

Ginsberg’s intention was to make public that which had always been private. His statement of purpose, if you like, was just that: “There was some conscious intention to make a cultural breakthrough, to talk in public as we talked in private...How we behave in private is actually the ultimate politics. So the original literary inspiration was to behave in public as we do in private” (qtd. George-Warren: 245). As Plath herself stated in an interview for the British Council, her Ariel poems were poems written “for the ear, not the eye...poems written out loud”. Alfred Alvarez in The Savage God observes that artists such as Plath have, in fact, “invented a public language” from their “private tribulations”, and that this is the inherent “risk:” of their work (Alvarez: 216). The Ariel poems mark a transition to this particular form of
externalisation of the private. The external world serves her poetry only as a comment upon the internal, the poet’s own consciousness. Hughes, in his “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems” notes that Plath did not separate her private reality from that of the world around her, but, in fact, lived within that reality on a daily basis: “she had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality. She lived right in it, especially during the last two years of her life” (Newman 187). For Plath then, private reality was something constant and all pervading. There was no separation of public and private; there was merely the monad of her own existence.

Charles Newman notes that Plath’s outward appearance also changed at the time of the Ariel poems: the fifties golden girl was replaced by a “deliberately dowdy, hyper-English” woman – a mother and “established poetess” (Newman 46). The dispersion of the “Smith girl” marked a new stage in the evolution of Plath as poet. External surfaces were no longer a priority; all that mattered was the quality of the inner life. Her poem, ‘In Plaster’ (CP 158-159) describes this shift in personae from the woman on the outside to the woman on the inside: “There are two of me now:/ This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one”. “The old yellow” persona is the spokeswoman of a private ontology, the poetry of Ariel, a poetry that Plath declared had to be spoken out loud, to be made public. This “old yellow” woman, stripped of any suitable public face, nonetheless symbolises the poet’s drive to air this symbol of self. Breaching the orthodox social and literary code of the separation of private and public affairs, Plath brandishes the personal, secret self. Ariel embodies the tenet of Lautrémont that “whoever considers the life of a man finds therein the history of the species”; through self-exposure, Plath exposes not only her own distress but also of an entire post-war generation. By 1962, the most
literary productive year of her life, Plath was assuming public patterns, as had Ginsberg in 1956 with *Howl*, by which to communicate personal distress.

Plath’s ‘Daddy’ (CP 222) expresses a view of the world that intimately associates love with brutality, a view that reflects the historical ethos of the current age. The speaker associates herself with the most provocative examples of this brutality: the horror of Dachau, Belsen and Auschwitz, and their underlying commitment to violence. Plath is drawn to the psychotic nature of this vision of violence, connecting the psychotic experience of the self to the total abandonment of reality that permitted the holocaust. Death becomes an escape from the psychotic reality of love interwoven with violence: “Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you”. Plath’s only escape from this psychotic reality is through the cracks of the self and the darkness therein. In a sense, this escape is an honest one. Like Ginsberg in *Howl*, in the *Ariel* poems Plath appears naked before her audience speaking through the raw voice of the personal “I”. With both poets there remains a strong sense of performance, of playing to the audience, of shock factor. Nonetheless, the authenticities of the “I” voice remains, and the showmanship is perhaps, part of the inevitable exhibitionism of such a new and dramatic delivery, the fuel to its momentum. In the tradition of the self-exposure of the Beat poets, Plath exposes the corrosive effects of contemporary culture upon the individual’s sense of worth and integrity, the damage wreaked upon the imagination. The result is a higher level of honesty, an end to the artifice and masking of the life of the personality. This was a new creed, a commitment to combat the lies of poetic public relations with its policy of gentility and restraint. Instead, the full horror of the post-war psyche surfaced in a spew of outrageous self-display and reactionary effrontery to the literary and social code of repression and restraint. In a
1966 *Paris Review* interview, Ginsberg lays out the Beat commitment to poetic honesty which Plath, despite her dramatics, represents:

... what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends. So I began finding, in conversation, with Burroughs and Kerouac and Gregory Corso, in conversations with people whom I knew well, whose souls I respected, that the things we were telling each other for real were different from what was already in literature. And that was Kerouac’s great discovery in ‘On the Road’. The kind of things that he and Neal Cassady were talking about, he finally discovered were the subject matter for what he wanted to write down. That meant, at that minute, a complete revision of what literature was supposed to be, in his mind, and actually in the minds of the people that first read the book ... In other words there’s no distinction, there should be no distinction between what we write down, and what we really know to begin with. As we know it every day, with each other. And the hypocrisy of literature has been – you know like there’s supposed to be a formal literature, which is supposed to be different from ... in subject, or in diction and even in organization ... our quotidian inspired lives (qtd. George-Warren: 63).

This is in fact a manifesto for the kind of esoteric writing of the ‘confessional’ style, a proviso for self-disclosure by which the intimate matters of the personal life are now deemed
suitable, and indeed, essential for vital literature. Intimacies are the worthy subject of literature, and the social divide of public and private matters no longer exists. Plath’s own manifesto on the personal, given in an interview with the BBC, is qualified by what she calls “an informed and intelligent mind”, the tool that will allow the writer “to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying – like madness”. According to Plath’s criteria, the personal “shouldn’t be a shut box” or a mirror-looking narcissistic experience” but something more expansive, something more historical, “relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau (Tri-Quarterly 7: 71). History is picked through for what it can offer, in an effort to make the personal more historic, more poignant, more heroic, perhaps. The personal, in this sense, is served by the workings of “an informed and intelligent mind”. As the poet reminds us in her poem, ‘The Burnt-Out Spa (CP 137-8), history is divisible from the personal self; it merely serves the poet’s poetic purpose. And the purpose: to shift through the wreckage of a landscape or history in search of some resonance of the self. The speaker of ‘The Burnt-Out Spa’ emphatically clarifies this to her audience in the declaration, “It is not I, it is not I”. ‘Tulips’ makes evident the claim of the historical and social forces over the personal. The speaker declares her withdrawal from society in a series of declarations abnegating her social self. She declares, “I have nothing to do with explosions”, a reference to the impinging reality of atomic destruction from which she is delivered by her period of solitary confinement in hospital. Sickness becomes a means to an end, an escape from the overarching realities and responsibilities of history, society and politics. The colour of the tulips, red, is intrusive in this place of sanctuary where whiteness acts as an agent of clinical order and calm. The red tulips are redolent of the American struggle against world communism, an echo of the political order of nation beyond the quiet “winter” of the hospital walls.
The speaker has committed herself to a period of incubation during which she perceives her social self as something two-dimensional: “And I see myself, flat ridiculous”. In the face of authority of the tulips, the role of wife and mother seems insubstantial, wraith-like “cut-paper shadow” lacking full contours. The tulips are a source of disquiet – they remind the speaker of her place in the scheme of things, and her disturbing lack of control over the mechanisms of the corporate-industrial world. The image of the “a sunken rust-red engine” reminds her that the tulips are emissaries of this industrial landscape, predatory in their gaze: “They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat”. The military-industrial complex that Plath mentions in her essay “Context” (JP 62-65) hovers around the rim of the poem, forcing the speaker into an uncomfortable tension between the quiet of the hospital and the world-order beyond her bedside. Finally, she comes to accept that her heart, against her desire, is firmly planted in this world-order, as rooted as the tulips themselves are:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health (CP 162).

At the close of the poem the speaker and the tulips are synonymous, both products of a place “far away as health”. The poem’s dénouement is a moment of self-awareness in which the speaker recognises the commonality that links her to the tulips – that is, sickness itself. Plath’s fascination with the theme of sickness in poems such as ‘Paralytic’, ‘In Plaster’ and ‘Fever 103’ reaches a mature exegesis in ‘Tulips’. In this poem we understand that sickness is not merely a
condition of the individual, but a condition of society itself – the individual merely a component of the whole.

XI: The "American Psychosis"

The sickness itself is a condition of the mind, a ‘madness’ that Kerouac recognised in the America of the 1950s, the same ‘madness’ that sends Dean Moriaty on a flight across the United States. Kerouac’s novel can be read as crazed journey through the U.S. psyche: the geography of the novel a metaphor for the mind of a nation and Dean’s crazed adventures, a reflection of the state of that mind. “Mad” is the word most often associated with Kerouac’s hero, and indeed, his relationship with his travelling partner, Sal Paradise is based on a mutual understanding of “levels of madness” (Kerouac 10). Dean is in many ways the perennial adolescent, stuck in the role of an alienated rebel figure, condemned to a life of stasis that he seeks to escape by constant movement. Plath’s ‘Tulips’ (CP 160-62), likewise, involves an escape, but instead of movement, the speaker seeks refuge in inertia. This inertia is the by-product of a psychosis of which, the tulips are the concrete manifestation. Psychosis reduces reality to unreal forms, and so the speaker’s reality consists of a series of hallucinatory images revolving round an external provocateur – her ‘enemy’, the tulips. The external world has become a place filled with terror, inducing paranoia. In an article for The American Scholar (1955) Reinhold Neibhur observed what he termed the “American psychosis” of the post-war years, a “collective condition” he ascribed to the “unpredictable effects of history”: the rise of atomic weapons and the spread of world communism. While retaining “all the hopes of the previous century”, America bathed in a period of domestic security; however, the flaw in this “paradise” was the threat to international
security aroused by the spread of communism. On this point, Neibhur sees a case for what he calls a “collective schizophrenia” (Neibhur 12-14) in the American psyche, a condition of extreme tension in the nation between the desire to bathe in its economic good fortune, and its child-like fears of the enemy ‘out there’.

The ‘enemy’, in fact, lies on the inside. America was, as Ginsberg declared a monster, “Moloch”, a nation of “Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! Monstrous bombs!” (Ginsberg 18). Erich Fromm, whose work Escape from Freedom, Plath studied at Smith, points out that the real threat to American democracy was not from external sources – i.e. the Communists – but, rather, from within American’s own institutions. Fromm quotes John Dewey on this point:

The serious threat to our democracy . . . is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own institutions of conditions, which have given external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here – within ourselves and our institutions (Fromm 5).

The ‘madness’ of the generation reflects the ‘madness’ of the nation. In an unedited journal entry dated 6 November 1952, Plath expresses concern for the political health of the U.S. facing the prospect of a Republican leadership:
I don't think the need for a change in party justified the horrible combination of men that will take over the Eisenhower crusade – just think of Taft and foreign policy, Jenner and Rules and civil rights, McCarthy and appropriations and all the rest of the witch-hunters and undemocratic guys. It isn't Eisenhower I'm against, but all the men in his Trojan horse. Stevenson certainly was the Lincoln of the age, and I felt that it was my funeral when I got up the morning of his defeat (qtd. Strangeways 80).

"The World's Hardest Things"

Plath's anxiety is for the future of a country run by “undemocratic guys”. Her pessimistic view of the politics of the nation correlates to a pessimistic world-view, made up of what she calls, in another unedited letter to her mother, “the world's hardest things – like Hiroshima, the Inquisition or Belsen” (qtd. Bundtzen: 26). The Ariel poems embrace the “hardest things” in the world through a process of transference, and so, the emotive power of the Holocaust, for example, is grafted to the personal life, bringing about a tremendous implosion of emotion. In the same letter to her mother she argues for the necessity of emotional honesty, “for the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like”. Plath credited herself with knowing the “worst”. In a journal entry she documents her turn toward what she calls “the real world. Real situations” marks the beginning of the highly charged emotive poems of 1960-63. In the same entry she declares her intention to turn away from “the baby
gods, the old men of the sea, the thin people . . . and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and
brother and father and family” — to end the abstractions of the *Colossus* poems and turn toward
the personal (J 296). In a 1963 BBC broadcast Plath, commenting on Donald Hall’s new
anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*, notes, perhaps rather subjectively, that this new
poetry reflects “an inwardness of . . . images, [a] plummeting subjectivity . . . the uncanny
faculty of melting through the leaves of the wall paper through the dark looking glass into a
world one can only call surrealistic and irrational.” She concludes that: “The analyst’s couch has
played its role here, I think – that important and purgatorial bit of American literary furniture
(qtd. Strangeways: 159).

Is Plath’s observation here part of what David Holbrook in his study of Plath, *(Sylvia
Plath: Poetry and Existence, 1976)* and A.R. Jones in his essay on ‘Daddy’ conclude about her
own writing: that “the tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of our age”
(Newman 236). In an essay on Robert Bly, Gregory Orr asks the question: did Plath’s generation
“suffer too much history”, and quotes Louis Simpson’s poem, ‘The Silent Generation’ to illustrate
this point:

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When Hitler was the Devil
He did as he had sworn
With such enthusiasm
That even, donnerwetter
That the Germans say, “Far better
Had he never been born!”
It was my generation
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That put the devil down
With great enthusiasm.
But now our occupation
Is gone. Our education
Is wasted on the town.
We lack enthusiasm.
Life seems a mystery;
It's like the play a lady
Told me about: "It's not . . .
It doesn't have a plot,"
She says "it's history" (qtd. Jones & Daniels: 147-8).

XII: "Too Many Arms": The Existentialist Demand for Authenticity

Simpson's poem addresses the existential dilemma of the post-war generation whose predicament is now the end of history itself, the great "occupation" of the western world. The holocaust, what Simpson refers to as putting "the devil down" marks the end of the moral course of history. The rule of "the devil" (Hitler), now eradicated, has left the post-war generation with no moral purpose, and so western history no longer has a "plot". The spread of existentialism in the post-war years, with its emphasis on the freedom of the individual, was, in part, a reaction to the terrible reality of fascism. The existentialist's celebration of the autonomy of the individual human being, (albeit through disassociation), was achieved by a particular attention to the particular, what Mary Warnock calls "the concrete imagination", that disavowed any tendency
toward the abstract (Warnock 133). The existentialist realisation was that in the concrete detail could be found the significance of existence, and his/her own situation within that existence. In the process of breakdown, Esther Greenwood withdraws into an existential reality in which the quotidian details of her life (or Satre's 'facticity') begin to point toward a terrible vacuity. Esther can no longer recognise these details in the scheme of things. This reaction constitutes a rejection of her contemporary, diachronic self - of her self in the world, as she perceives it. Esther's reaction is a phenomenological one, demonstrated by her inability to perceive those objects that once constituted her world:

It was a stout shoe of cracked black leather and quite old, with tiny air holes in a scalloped pattern over the toe and a dull polish and it was pointed at me. It seemed to be placed on a grass green surface and that was hurting my right cheekbone. I kept very still, waiting for a clue that would give me some notion of what to do, a little left of the shoe I saw a vague heap of blue cornflowers on a white ground and this made me want to cry. It was the sleeve of my own bathrobe I was looking at, and my left hand lay pale as cod at the end of it (BJ 42).

As Gina Wisker notes, like the narrator of Satre's Nausea, who "feels something quite other" in a door handle, Esther cannot perceive her own body in its most familiar setting. This disassociation would seem to reflect Esther's synchronic relationship with the world, and a disavowal of her diachronic, social locus (Wisker 56). The structure of reality, as it was formerly perceived, is now in the process of disintegrating. This constitutes a fundamental rejection of the social taxonomy, of one's place in the scheme of things. Similarly, Esther's contemporary
protagonist, Holden Caulfield, chooses to disassociate himself from those elements of his culture he regards as inauthentic or 'phony'. As Richard Ohmann notes, this is Holden's "most frequently employed term of abuse" (Ohmann 57). Holden perceives himself to be part of a culture devoted to the realisation of the 'phony', and this realisation is the source of his disaffection from that culture. The epitome of this 'phoniness' is Holden's headmaster, Mr. Hass, according to Holden: "the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life" (Salinger 45). Mr. Haas is the ultimate 'phony':

On Sundays [he] went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff (Salinger 14).

What Holden despises is inauthentic self-representation and a snobbery that relies upon an exclusive class system, a carefully regulated social taxonomy. The losers in this are those who fail to meet the demands of inauthentic self-representation. The inauthenticity of snobbery depends upon (in Ohmann's words) "the economic and social arrangements of capitalism, and in their concealment" (58). Holden perceives these "arrangements" in another 'Pency' graduate - Ossenburger - whose identity revolves around the "a pile of dough". Like Holden's headmaster, Ossenburger is full of inauthentic gestures; in particular, public demonstrations of piety in the
school chapel. Ossenburger's 'phoniness' lies in his application of external forms of inauthentic self-representation, forms intrinsic to the capitalist's device of marketing (58).

Holden's phenomenology is intimately coloured by class distinctions. These distinctions comprise careful differentiation of self and other - down to the smallest detail. He observes two nuns in a sandwich bar whose luggage he perceives to be "cheap":

It isn't important, I know, but I hate it when somebody has cheap suitcases. It sounds terrible to say it, but I even get to hate somebody, just looking at them, if they have cheap suitcases with them. Something happened once. For a while when I was at Elkton Hills, I roomed with this boy, Dick Slagle, that had these very inexpensive suitcases. He used to keep them under his bed, instead of on the rack, so that nobody'd see them standing next to mine. It depressed holy hell out of me, and I kept wanting to throw mine out or something, or even trade with him. Mine came from Mark Cross, and they were genuine cowhide and all that crap, and I guess they cost quite a pretty penny. But it was a funny thing. Here's what happened. What I did, I finally put my suitcases under my bed, instead of on the rack, so that old Slagle wouldn't get a goddam inferiority complex about it. But here's what he did. The day after I put mine under my bed, he took them out and put them back on the rack. The reason he did it, it took me a while to find out, was because he wanted people to think my bags were his. He really did. He was a very funny guy, that way. He was always saying snotty things about them, my suitcases, for instance. He kept saying they were too new and bourgeois. That was his favorite goddam word. He read it
somewhere or heard it somewhere. Everything I had was bourgeois as hell. Even my fountain pen was bourgeois. He borrowed it off me all the time, but it was bourgeois anyway. We only roomed together about two months. Then we both asked to be moved. And the funny thing was, I sort of missed him after we moved, because he had a helluva a good sense of humor and we had a lot of fun sometimes. I wouldn't be surprised it he missed me too, At first he only used to be kidding when he called my stuff bourgeois, and I didn't give a damn - it was sort of funny, in fact. Then, after a while, you could tell he wasn't kidding any more. The thing is, it's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs - if yours are really good ones and theirs aren't. You think if they're intelligent and all, the other person, and have a good sense of humor, that they don't give a damn whose suitcases are better, but they do. They really do. It's one of the reasons why I roomed with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine (Salinger 108-9).

Holden's obsession with suitcases are indicative of the extent to which details pertaining to class dominate his phenomenology and instruct his view of the world. These details define and locate self in relation to other, subject to object, in a closely stratified social order. Similarly, Plath's poem, 'Totem' (CP 264-65), associates the image of the suitcase with the nature and identity of the self:

There is no terminus, only suitcases
Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes
Notions and tickets, circuits and folding mirrors (CP 264).

Plath's metaphor of the suit and the suitcase suggests that the self exists only as a form of public raiment, as a ready-made suit, purpose-made. The self emerges from the protective sheath of the suitcase as a vestige for public ceremonies, as a synchronic creation. Images of self-reflexivity abound, producing a subject that is "mad": "I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms" (CP 265). Too much self-reflexivity has led to madness, to multiple (duplicitous) personalities: the "many arms" of the spider. The corollary, then, of the inauthentic public gesture observed by Holden Caulfield, is a chronic state of masquerade in which the authentic self is replaced by a series of manufactured selves. Ultimately, this degree of masquerade cannot be maintained, and the "folding mirrors" of Totem' emerge as a symbol of self-disintegration. Esther Greenwood's bold attempt to discard the vestiges of her societal selves on the top of the Amazon Hotel, is not enough to save her from the devastating effect of their duplicity. The roots of this duplicity lie in the very process of female socialisation. This is the "terrible truth" with which Totem' ends, "multiplied in the eyes of the flies". Plath's plural "death with its many sticks" hints at the gruesome process of self-disintegration involved in the loss of an authentic self.

The inauthentic self is born from a post-war topography whose dreadful events have forced the self into a new relationship with the world around it. Arthur Miller has described this process of inauthenticity as a tendency to "deaden our connections, and hence our psyches, to those actions we find it difficult to justify" (Miller 521). For Miller, the holocaust was the great 'Fall' of the Jewish people, the most tremendous act of human betrayal - a theme he explored in his 1964 play After the...
Fall. Indeed, Miller connects the terrible human betrayal of the holocaust to the theme of domestic and political betrayal (McCarthyism). McCarthy justified these perhaps seemingly untenable connections of betrayal to the holocaust by stating: “you’ve got to begin somewhere. Otherwise the larger social evil becomes simply something spinning in space. It has no human root at all, which is a very common thing to believe” (qtd. Bigsby: 215). As Charlotte Crofts notes in her essay "Holocaust as Spectacle", the true extent of the holocaust began to emerge at the end of the war as the rise of the mass media permitted images of concentration camp victims to be represented on news reels across the U.S. (Crofts 3). Flickering black and white images of starved, wraith like creatures introduced the nation to the incomprehensible idea of the holocaust. These images - of an unimaginable hell - penetrated the American psyche slowly, reluctantly. The extent of the evil committed resisted comprehension, irreversibly altering humanity's understanding of itself and its potential for evil. As Tony Kushner posits in The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination, throughout the 1950's, the holocaust was still not understood as genocide; this was not accepted (at least in Britain) until the mid-1980's when a specifically Jewish memorial was erected for British holocaust victims. After 1960, following the widely publicised Eichmann trial, references to the holocaust became more graphic, more gruesome (Crofts 8). From this point on, the holocaust indelibly entered the 'public record', and the dialectic of self and other, Jewish victim and Nazi perpetrator, became an established facet of the post-war psyche (Kushner 206-69; 247-8).

As Plath writes in 'Lady Lazarus', "there is a charge, a very large charge" to be incurred for confronting the horrors of the holocaust (CP 246). What Plath hints at is the necessity of restructuring the self in relation to the world, of revising the dialectic of self and other and self-to-self in the light of such immense "scars". The cost of this new ontology will be the loss of an
authentic self; such a self cannot survive within a psychic topography that includes the holocaust, and therefore, masquerade becomes the most pragmatic solution: self-duplicity/ duplicitous selves are part of the process of the survival. In the light of this, Esther's self-affirming "I am, I am, I am" following her 'recovery' is an indication of her reacceptance of this process. Indeed, this is not merely a statement of self-recovery or self-affirmation, but a statement of re-initiation into the culture of duplicity. Esther's re-entry into 1950's American life involves a restructuring of multiple selves, a self-conscious, almost technical approach to her own ontology that will leave her "patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (BJ 254). Esther's 'recovery' is more like a process of self-costuming in which the authentic self is sacrificed for the cost of participation in the social 'theatre'. Hence, ultimately, the existential demand for authenticity serves no purpose: Esther returns to the business of performing (her first performance being the Medical Board meeting) in order to renew her membership to society itself. Like the speaker of 'Lady Lazarus', Plath's protagonist has understood the fundamental dialectic of audience (society) and performer (self); and so proceeds toward the obligations of the show itself.