INTRODUCTION
Introduction

I: Beyond the Confessional

"You may think, perhaps, that I am too confidential and communicative of my own private history. It may be so. But my way of writing is to think aloud and follow my own humours than much consider who is listening to me" (De Quincey. Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, xxiii).

Sylvia Plath, ‘confessional poet’, was herself a critic of that style and in an interview for the British council in 1962 made the following statement:

I cannot sympathize with those cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife...I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, with an informed and intelligent mind (Orr 167).

The term ‘confessional’ is hardly an appropriate label for the type of highly formed drama of the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Hers is poetry of the classical proscenium filled with elaborate masks, "behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death" (J 296.) ‘Confessional’ suggests some unguarded outpouring from overfilled emotional recesses. Plath does not pour; she flicks with the tip of her poised tongue.
M.L. Rosenthal's term presupposes the listener's superior status. When we read Plath, we do not hear the flaccid gush of an agonised confessant but, rather, the voice of a skilled and master rhetorician. We do not bow our priestly heads with sympathy or even empathy: a defiant and august queen keeps us from our own tenderness. Rosenthal's quiet response to Plath in his *The New Poets* is appropriate for the modernist gentlemanly sensibility he represents. He warns us of the 'dangerous road' of the "confessional way" leading to the Romantic fallacy in which art becomes life; in which Sylvia's death wish becomes her suicide (Rosenthal 83). The term 'confessional', according to critic Julia Penelope, implies that something "embarrassing and inappropriate" has been committed, "for which transgression [the speaker] is in need of absolution". Penelope concludes that the label is simply an easy dismissal on the part of the critic, a quick means to trivialisation (Penelope 54; 62). Perhaps for a man of Rosenthal's sensibility, Plath's poetry causes some embarrassment, and so, the term 'confessional' becomes an easy way of dealing with this. By dismissing her poetry to the irrational and numinous arena of religion, Rosenthal makes a quick and easy exit from the harsher realities of Plath's work. Religion tends to obfuscate the truth, and so provides an easy slip road off the principal route through her work. The term "confessional" also creates taxonomy for Plath's poetry within the power politics of the confessional act. According to Foucault, the act of confession subjects the confessing subject to the authority of the listener, and thus confession becomes a codifying, objectifying examination of one's motivation (Prado 93). Within the Foucauldian discourse, the act of confession is constitutive of the subject and "helps to create the private individual, measured by deep interiority and feelings, and by a personal history" (Tambling 2). The confessing subject is, thus, intimately involved in his/her process of self-fashioning. This is paramount to any reading of the Plath or the Plathean "I".
As Christine Battersby observes in *Gender and Genius* (1989), "in creative writing a woman always has the problem of aligning Romantic notions of art as an instinctive, non-rational activity against her need to assess (rationally and consciously) the likely reactions to a female voice (149). In other words, the woman creative writer is likely to be more self-conscious than the male because she bears the weight of prejudice even before she has written a word; she 'hears' prejudice in the minds of an imaginary audience and she falters. The differentiation between writing that is 'feminine' and writing of the 'female' is what is essential. It is 'female' writing that is the object of disdain, not the label 'feminine'. The 'female', as Battersby elucidates, has been categorised as inferior in the Western tradition of Art since Aristotle defined women as lacking in "judgement, wit, reason, skill, talent, and psychic (bodily) heat. In the Aristotelian praxis, women were susceptible to excess passion and imagination and therefore, a lack of rationality (12). In the classical definition hysteria was the particular 'female' mode of expression, an enclave that, in this century has been taken over by the post-structuralists in search of the so-called 'feminin'. The 'feminin' of Lacanian psychoanalysis is synonymous with the 'Other', the 'Mother', the pre-oedipal phase of development, a state without ego or, in classical terms, the Aristotelian 'hysteria'. Furthermore, the search for the 'feminin' is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, within the Lacanian 'Imaginary' or pre-'Symbolic' (the Freudian pre-oedipal) phase of psychic development (198).

Freud associated creativity with the neurotic element - that is, the sublimated 'libido' - that, for a woman meant the sublimation of her intelligence and creativity as the only way to resolve the Oedipal drama. The woman who is socialised as 'feminine' thus surrenders her rights to her creativity and intelligence; the woman who foregoes this process, the 'masculine' woman,
claims her creativity at the expense of neurosis (193-4). In this schema, the creative female is both 'hysterical' and 'neurotic', subject to a state of excessive passion and sublimated desire. If we approach Rosenthal's term in this light, then the label 'confessional' is derivative of the association of the 'female' with excess and lack of self-control. The poetry of Sylvia Plath, in the words of Rosenthal, "on the dangerous road" to the "confessional way", strips the artist herself of any credit for control or management of her craft, suggesting a lack of technical skill or a display of the novice's immaturity. Rosenthal's grandfatherly warning denies Plath the credit of a 'good' poet, and instead, associates the expressionistic style of her writing with the 'hysterical' and irrational of the 'female'. Indeed, his tone betrays a rather oracular sense of himself as critic, the divining god whose warning foresees the tragedy of such a "way". The reductive association of the artist's oeuvre with her life as something of a runaway train denies Plath her status as skilled rhetorician and gifted poet. Alfred Alvarez in his essay "Sylvia Plath" likewise entangles the life of the artist with her work in a romantic glorification of the 'Artist as Hero', or 'Heroine' in this case: "The achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable. The one could not exist without the other. And this is right . . . It needed not only great intelligence and insight to handle the material of them, it also took a kind of bravery. Poetry of this order is a murderous art "(Newman 67). The romance of the artist-heroine giving her life for her art is an extension of the Romantic philosophy that the life of the Artist is given entirely to his oeuvre; that without Art, there is no raison d'être. This philosophy was dreamed up for the glorified male artist. It has little application for the female artist (nor in this century particularly for the male artist) whose life will always include more than just her art by dint of her very 'femaleness'. The female artist will always have other balls (responsibilities) to juggle.
Confessions are not the substance of Sylvia Plath’s poetry; nor did confessions lead her to a premature death. Her poetry and her prose embrace many contradictory personae; they are authorial projections and as such, cannot be read as the ‘real’ Sylvia Plath. They are simply aspects of a self on show, in the arena of her writing. As a reader, we meet the glowing ebullient girl of the 1950’s, spangled with the gold stars of her own bright future; the girl who reflected the abundance of an age; then, ‘Sylvia’ the avid intellectual, thirsting for more and more knowledge; Sylvia, the devoted wife and housekeeper, anxious to make a “lemon layer cake” (J 201). Then, a self-controlled perfectionist Austro-German who was also a frightened, squealing child, a gossiping, petty female, an ambitious male poet baited by the shadow of her great poet husband; and then the brooding, self-eclipsed Sylvia who longed to be free of the dark side of her moon.

A reader of Plath’s poetry will find himself slipping back and forth between the rhetoric of one persona and another. In her use of personae she is, if anything, in step with the chief modernists, Eliot and Pound who adopted personae to express emotion: Eliot’s Prufrock; Pound’s Mauberly. It was, however, Sylvia’s desire to fill her poetry with “real things: real emotions” (J 296). Her personae are merely disguises for, what Snodgrass deemed to be “the sincerity” of the poem; that true “blood jet” that “is poetry” (CP 269). Her masks are not the masks of the true confessant. She plays many parts, something she learns from her great idol Yeats.

To attribute the term ‘confessional’ to Sylvia Plath’s poetry is to hinge her work upon the back of such great “confessional” works as that of St. Augustine. Like Plath, St Augustine delved
into the state of the inner life, but his confessions read more as a tract for conversion than of unfettered self-expression. De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* are the induced outpourings of an effected mind, what Rimbaud called the ‘derangement of the senses”, an exploration of the limits of the individual self. Then, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, while frank and autobiographical, still follow the dogmatic pattern of his own personal and political ideology. All these so-called confessional writers wrestle with the state of the self; in particular, its well being, according to a peculiar understanding of that state. In a letter to an imperial agent accompanying his *Confessions* Augustine writes:

> In these scrolls take a look at me that you may not go beyond in your praise of what I really am; believe what is said of me, not by others, but only myself. In this book think about me and see what I have been in myself and by myself (Clark 68).

Augustine is adamant that we view him only through the words of his ‘confessing’ self. He would like his reader to believe that the Augustine of the *Confessions* is the truest portrait of himself; all else is delusion. Yet, the modern reader, in search of an ‘authentic’ self is distrustful of the cumbersome weight of the religious apparatus of the *Confessions*. It is, after all, a relation of personal conversion to the faith of Christ. We have the ‘unsaved’ Augustine until Book VIII and then the ‘saved’ Augustine from then onwards. This duality of self, ironically, echoes the Manichean duality of the light versus the dark side of existence. There is something uneasy about Augustine’s carefully dissected ‘fallen’ and ‘unfallen’ selves, something that keeps us from a closer rapprochement with the author. If this is personal writing, Augustine has kept his reader at
a distance with his division of former and present self. The modern reader is looking for
something less didactic. We find it hard to “believe” in such an unnatural clarity of identity.
Surely only great propagandists can succeed in presenting such distinct selves. Augustine’s
‘personal’ expression of self in the guise of autobiography is belied by his desire to promote this
formula of self, between what he has “been” and what he is now. What presents itself, as the
language of a personal self becomes the language of a public self, promoted for the sake of
religion. The Augustine of the Confessions is so encased in religion that, personal though his
story is, the language of his confession, his religion obliterates the personal.

Confession is an idea rooted in religion. Outside the boundary of religion it has little
application. We cannot, as Rosenthal did, seek to transfer the idea of confession to the secular. It
will go awry. Likewise, we cannot apply our secular notion of the ‘personal self’ to the religious
world. Garments of dogma will always obscure the personal. Those men and women of the
church will not remove their garb. It involves too much disclosure, perhaps too much self-
consciousness. The writing of Sylvia Plath does not involve confession. Unlike those men and
women of the church she has more than one outfit at her disposal. She has not placed herself in
the hands of a pre-ordained listener; neither does she speak to us with a sense of regret or shame.
She remains intact within the comfort of several choices of self-disclosure, between the layers of
her several speaking selves.

And where do the words of a sincere ‘confessant’ come from? Augustine’s claims to his
words come from a contrite heart, a heart that knows its intent before it is transferred to the mind.
It is a heart well prepared, then, in rhetoric:
The word I myself speak to you, I have in my heart beforehand: it proceeds towards you, yet it does not withdraw from me. Something that was not in you begins to exist in you, and it remains in me while it goes outwards toward you. Just as my word, after being spoken, exists in your senses without leaving my mind, so the word, when spoken exists in the sense without leaving its father. My word was with me yet proceeded into speech (qtd. Starnes: 2).

This transference from the 'heart' of the author to the audience (whether it be to the heart or mind of the audience is a debatable matter) seems to lack the spontaneity one would associate with confession. This is not the "spontaneous Me" that Whitman celebrates; nor is it the private idiosyncratic voice we might expect from a personal self. It is more of a public persona, the persona that wears a public mask, the "megaphone" sounding through that Camille Paglia identifies in her essay "Sexual Personae: The Cancelled Preface" as the origins of the Western personality). These public masks are, according to Paglia, the repositories of the "hidden masks of our ancestors and heirs". In the case of Sylvia Plath, the ancestral masks were those of her German father and Austrian mother, masks she whips out for the purpose of her art in poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Medusa' (CP 222; 224). As Paglia deduces these ancestral masks are not the sum of the individual self: "behind the shifting face of personality is a hard nugget of self, a genetic gift" (Paglia 103). Augustine’s Confessions, on the other hand, the first piece of autobiographical writing, seems to betray the reader’s desire for intimacy and spontaneity with its self-conscious masking of the authentically personal.
The confessional mode is not something new. Its idiom has merely changed. Consider Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Byron's *Don Juan*: both are examples of the confessional genre. The Romantics turned the events of the exterior world into a meditation on the inner world of the human self. Wordsworth and his associates acknowledged the rule of emotion, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 64). In that sense they paved the way for the new poetry of the "I", the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton. They experimented with a form, which, was to reflect "the life" it contained within it (Coleridge 68). The "life" within the personal writings of Plath and her contemporaries necessitated a new form. The academia of Pound and Eliot were no longer relevant. In an age where the psyche had been so stifled by pedestrian life, the "silent generation" was beginning to speak. Its new voice was the personal element of life, quashed by too much attention to form that belied "the dread of the meaningless which was Man's fate" (Didion 207).

Plath's particular form of "I", however, is female in its origin, and unlike the Romantics, who excluded the female from the revered "I" voice, Plath embraces "I" voice to mean the female self. As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, the Romantics distinguished between popular works of art produced for the masses - whose gender was feminine, and the Art of a true artist or genius, whose gender was always male (Huyssen 1986).

Whitman's 'Song to Myself' declares for the first time in American poetry the subject of self and its expansive territory – in the case of Whitman, its metaphoric land of the United States. The self of Plath's poetry is less open and expansive; for in her writing she ushers in the age of the post-modern self: fractured, a pastiche, multi-lateral. It is a self restricted to her era, an era
doomed to preoccupation with war, the atom bomb, the threat of communism; to the preservation of family and the corporation as ward against an existential universe.

Plath’s personal poetry would in no way be fitting for the taste of the great modernists, Eliot and Pound. It would be an affront to the private sensibility of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) in which Eliot propagates the notion of anti-self. Despite his staunch anti-expressionist view that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely in him will be the man who suffers and the mind that creates” would not Eliot himself also share a certain sense of the shock effect of Plath’s naked “I” persona? The effects of World War II however, shattered the private sensibility of men like Eliot. The psychic wounds of the war had split open that sense of the private self and the gash was too wide to heal. In an era that had witnessed the holocaust and the atom bomb, a gentlewoman’s words were not appropriate.

Eliot’s “Shantih, Shantih” that brings down the curtain on 'The Waste Land' is a stoic gentleman’s determination to see hope in a crumbling modern world. Stoicism, according to Eliot, offers “a refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him” (Eliot, 1950: 112). Plath's choice of the candid and colloquial idiom would reflect the choice of one who, in Eliot's words, considers [her]self “the active source of what [s]he does”; the hubristic condition that is ‘always punished by disaster” (Eliot, 1957: 128). To be sure, Plath is the “active source” of her poems. She does not sit quietly, and her first person utterances proclaim her choice of self-expression. Hers is not the stoic way; for like confession, the act implies submission of the ego to a superior force. In a post-war era that had had enough of submission to fate, Plath's is an unyielding ego. Now was the time to rid oneself of the anti-expressionist view
of the "New Critics'. This was an era of Cold War, of limbo, a deep freeze in the relationships of the world's superpowers. The holocaust had surpassed the limits of imagination, and for the post-war generation, the process of sublimation had begun. Born into an era where war was at least an imaginative preoccupation, where the execution of the Rosenbergs was part of her young adult awakening, and the Cold War a normalcy, Eliot's decree to be quiet and simply submit to the way of the universe was inconceivable.

II: "I Celebrate Myself": Walt Whitman and the American Colloquial

The self of Sylvia Plath's poetry exposes a suffering self, but it is not the universal human suffering of Eliot's Tiresias. It is more akin to the personal "I" of Whitman's "Song of Myself":

I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there (Whitman 59).

The "I" is a direct assault upon the reader. It is a voice whose origin will never be completely determinable for Plath does not care if we hear her; for she is not in the confessional chamber, but rather within the room of her own inner ear. She addresses herself in the silence of that "glassy hour" where the echo of speech can be heard by her alone. It is not the "inwardness" of Augustine's Confessions, a self-effacing style that is not "emotional, labyrinthine, or far-fetched", but rather demonstrates "clarity of thought, ardour of heart, depth of understanding . . . related to the realm of eternal images" with "the consciousness of history, the awareness of leadership" (Guardini 17). Plath cannot claim the 'cosmic' scope of St. Augustine; she does not
have the same degree of responsibility as that 4th century bishop, whose basic urge for writing *Confessions* was to bear witness to his former sinner self and an audience of unsaved souls. It was Augustine's business to be “eternal” and “cosmic”. He was dealing with salvation. Plath’s poetry could never be her salvation. She would always have her human self to confront in the day-to-day, beyond the stage of her poetical self. It was critical that St. Augustine address his former self and lord it over him, make an exhibition of what he had once been: this is the miserable wretch I once was; look at the man I have become. The *Confessions* is more an act of self-affirmation, a re-establishment of personal identity within a new matrix of being. Plath writes as though she were folded “back into her body”. She addresses complex strata of selves that shift and turn from poem to poem as she configures her own psyche. She is the night flower whose “deep throat” is coated with the mucous of many, many words (CP272). Her word chamber is not a place of confession, but of psychic resolution.

Whitman’s “I” freed the American poet to himself. His casual demeanour opens the realm of poetry to the several private and informal quarters of the self. We, the audience, are invited to roam through his thoughts. Like Augustine, Whitman makes the private public, but his relaxed address encourages a faith in his power to create intimacy. We are his natural cohorts: “I celebrate myself and sing myself/ And what I assume you shall assume” (Whitman 29). This casual address is a stance, but as the subject of the stance is the self, it serves to increase the credibility of the subject matter. Whitman is determined to remain as physical as possible and his persistence in the casual form re-enforces our sense of the physical, embodied Whitman. Hands pressed into pockets, the gargantuan poet strides across the American landscape, his physical self “quivering (him) to a new identity”; standing before us he declares, “it is time to explain myself
- let us stand up”. Then, the bombshell: “Nothing, not God, is greater to oneself than one’s self is” (Whitman 76).

Plath inherits the freedom of Whitman, the colloquial ‘Walt’. It is self-conscious; but as Whitman wrote, America herself was self-conscious, struggling into evolution, an awakening identity. It is the struggle for self that Whitman catalogues in his poetry. At times his self-exhortations reveal the awkwardness of the poet in the symbolic dress of his nation; the ‘I’ that is both Whitman and America. The career of Whitman’s self becomes the career of his country; as he stumbles so does she. The voice of “Song of Myself” oscillates between the voice of a solitary man addressing his own self and a man reaching out to the consciousness of his country. Whitman’s absolute belief in the principle of democracy propels him towards a “vision” that involves “speech”. “Speech is the twin of my vision” he says in “Song of Myself” (Whitman 50) without speech there is no democracy. Without speech there is no personality. The colloquial idiom of his American self becomes the vehicle for Whitman’s search for the personality of America and himself. Whitman unloosed colloquial America amongst her poetry. A poet like Sylvia Plath found parts of that same speech at the tip of her pen.

The poetry of Walt Whitman is determined that we meet with the persona of the poet. He introduces three aspects of himself as poet: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos”(Whitman 48). There is the male American Whitman who jauntily converses in his native idiom; the ‘working man’ Whitman, a physical embodiment; then, the disembodied self, the eternal Whitman, the transcendental self. The quotidian and the cosmic come together. Whitman has created a persona that incorporates the living, physical man with the mythic man.
This serves his purpose. He wishes to make it known that his idea of ‘man’, the modern American man, is yet “a simple and separate person” (Whitman 76). For Whitman, this “simple and separate self” was perhaps a credible entity, part of the wonderful unfolding of his contemporary America: as America found herself, so were its citizens able to define themselves as separate individuals. America is symbol of the mythic man within which the colloquial man plays his part. It is idealistic and it is naïve, but for the man of Whitman’s era it could work.

Yet the “modern man” that Whitman envisioned was not to be so “simple and separate”. The poets of the 1950’s, Plath and her contemporaries, were not so straightforward. Theirs was not a simple world and their identity was complex. We meet Whitman, poet, through an affected informality. We know that it is a pose; all poets must have their pose, but we enjoy it for its lack of ceremony. At times, perhaps, it becomes too persistent, too much of a rejoinder to ‘join in’, and we don’t want to. Still, we are swept along on the gusto of words, the bravado of self, the man and the myth. Plath inherits the cocky Whitman. She knows how to shatter the sense of ceremony; but her presence is less naïve than Whitman’s. She does not have his gusto. What she has is more complex and more alarming.

It could be said that Whitman opened up the wound that American poets could not stop picking at: the question of self that became the question of the tormented self. In an age of an omnipotent and omniscient media it is almost impossible to disassociate oneself from the events of the world. The Korean War was the first war to be televised in the States; following on from that, the war in Vietnam. The electrocution of the Rosenbergs was given high media coverage and, as the countdown drew nearer; it became a psychic obsession for America. It is the first
sentence of Plath’s *The Bell Jar*; it is the heroine’s first thought within the life of the novel. The
events of a tormented world became the objective correlative for its tormented inhabitants. War
on the outside became the metaphor for the inner life. For Robert Bly, editor of the anti-
establishment magazine *The Sixties*, the writing of a poem that opened up the personal was an
act “of opposition to the existing order”. Opening the vault of the self goes beyond the conscious,
into a realm that leads to acts that must involve conflict with the world as it is. The self becomes
a tool for conflict against the social norms that disturb it.

III: "What Took Place in My Dreams": Poet as Philosopher -The 'Overmind Lens'

The conscious self of the writer, that thinking man or woman becomes, in the words of
De Quincey, “a philosopher”. The writer is a philosopher not only of thoughts, of a particular
ideology, but also a philosopher of language. She chooses a particular language and, by her
choosing, this language becomes her own. All writers have their ideology; a form of self-
expression with a purpose and intent. The origins of this expression begin with the subjective
experience of the writer alone, but once expressed become the property of her audience. The
writer, in bequeathing her expression, her language to her audience is, in fact, giving up the
deeds to her subjective view; that peculiar lens through which his thought was first received.
This public bequeathal of his language and ideas turns the microcosmic experience into the
macrocosmic. Once the word is written and handed over for distribution to its readership it
undergoes a social and political birthing. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* which, written
in 1928 we imagine (as we can only do) was intended to stir up the awareness of those ‘thinking’
men and women of her society to the plight of women who wished to write professionally. That
particular essay has now become the property of the feminist enclave of critics by dint of it demonstrating some degree of feminist thought. Just exactly how much feminist thought it contains will be determined differently by each individual reader of each era. Critics such as Adrienne Rich and Elaine Showalter have found Woolf’s essay to be too ladylike in its demeanour, demonstrating too much Edwardian self-consciousness and socialization. The fact is that Woolf was able to take something from the realm of her private experience as a female writer of the 1920’s and make it relevant to the social status of all women of her class (it must be acknowledged that it is a manifesto limited to class). In doing so she is making what is for her as a professional female writer a matter of great personal concern, even of intimate concern. The fact that a woman needs a room of her own in order to be a successful professional becomes something of tremendous universal concern to all middle-class women whether they have considered writing as a profession or not. Woolf is demonstrating, by drawing from her own experience of lack of personal domain, that the personal is intrinsically social.

The private space of a woman’s home is also a cultural and social sphere. As Woolf has pointed out in her essay “Professions for Women” (1931), the woman is never quite at home there. At the height of her creative output Sylvia Plath could write at home only in the small hours before dawn, before the daily recital of “packing the hard potatoes”, “packing the babies” and the “sick cats” of ‘Lesbos’ (CP 227). The title of this poem draws us into the image of the ‘vicious’ kitchen as something like the marooned island of the Greek original with its all-female inhabitants. Plath is writing of her ‘Lesbos’ experience as the unfortunate plight inherited by her marriage, the stamp of her social status. It is also the setting for a private “hell” in Formica. The home, the setting of the domestic life, corresponds to her social status as wife and mother. In the
eyes of society her primary function is to deal with “the stink of fat and baby crap” and the “impotent husband” who slinks in and out of the shadows of this “windowless Hollywood” drama. It is a drama of the most mundane where the creative woman is subsumed to the duty of diapers, feeds, and the ‘smog of cooking”. The disappointment at the reality of her ‘social contract’ leads her to retreat from the ‘Lesbos’ that she has found herself stranded upon and to enter into what Van Doren Sterns in his introduction to the Selected Writings of De Quincey calls, “the innermost recesses of the subconscious mind”(16). This retreat does not lead her into the confessional realm, but down to the subterranean world of De Quincey’s descent. It is a place of retreat. For De Quincey, it was a place of “dream-work”. For Plath, it is the equivalent of the sedatives she took to help her sleep, a place she arrives at “doped and thick” (CP 226). It is a coma of sorts where the writer within the socially conditioned woman is dropped “from a terrible altitude” and arrives at a place where her unconscious is free to roam. The woman from Lesbos is “knocked out of [her] right mind], out of the cultural cell of the island she inhabits, and for a few short hours is free to swim the depths of the seas around.

Writing would become a long, deep swim after hours. For Virginia Woolf, finding the space for writing was something of political and economic import, as well as physical and psychological. It was the same for Plath. Her writing allowed her some independent income, a private and psychological space and a separate identity from that of her husband. While writing she was, literally, her own woman. For that short period of time in the day she did not belong to the social contract of marriage and family; she was beyond the “viciousness” of the kitchen. Instead, she became the woman of Lawrence’s story, the “woman who rode away”. Like Lawrence’s heroine, she found her own “great blank hills” without a single footprint but her
own: those words tapped from the keys of her typewriter. This flight from her social self led to a self-imposed alienation from the world. Tragically, it was to become an alienation that led her to self-destruction, but while she was alive, it was alienation at the crux of her existence. Plath’s withdrawal into what H.D. called “the overmind” state was the nucleus of her creative output in the last few months of her life. Her writing and her life became focused around a liminal state of consciousness, with more and more of Bly’s “deep images”. It was not writing of the confessional sort that had brought her here, but writing of heightened consciousness. She was creating the “jellyfish experience” of H.D’s Thought & Vision (19). Her plasma was the “glassy blue” hours of the dawn that protected her writing in its gestatory state from being shattered by the mundane world that occupied the rest of her waking hours.

A poem such as ‘Nick and the Candlestick’, ‘Edge’ or ‘Ariel’ emerges from a place of vision. H.D. in Notes on Thought & Vision called it a place of “abnormal consciousness” involving a set of “super-feelings” that extend through the mind causing it to take on a physical characteristic. Through the physical incarnation of this “overmind lens” the artist is open to “the whole world of vision” before him (19; 23). He can create great works of art and literature. Sylvia Plath had grown into her “overmind” by the time she was writing her Ariel poems; she had found the lens that would lead her into the “innermost recesses” of her own unconscious mind”. De Quincey speaks of “some separate chamber in [the]brain” that holds “some horrid alien nature”; a “numerical double of [one’s]own consciousness”. It is the predicament of a writer having met up with his multifarious selves within “what he once thought the inviolable sanctuary of himself. Like De Quincey, Plath joined her various selves in the writing of her final poems. You could call this automatic writing. It has the same surreal quality as that of De
Quincey "following [his] own humours". Plath's interest in the realm of the surreal can be detected in comments she made for a BBC reading (qtd. Hughes, 'Notes on Poems 1956-63') in which she describes the inspiration for her poem, 'The Disquieting Muses':

It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico – *The Disquieting Muses*. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting – three terrible faceless dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women – the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, de Quincey's sisters of madness (CP 276).

The retreat from her domestic and cultural reality ends with a complete withdrawal into the surreal world of the unconscious mind. For the serious artist faced with a disturbance to her creative powers there is no choice but to create space for oneself - within this "separate chamber". It is both a physical and psychic space, and so, while sitting at her desk, Plath draws around her the boundaries of a writing chamber. That chamber, like the Queen's chamber, becomes the place for private audiences with her closest counsellors. These counsellors are those multifarious selves she calls upon in her body of writing.
IV: "The Shadowy Recesses": The Sub-conscious and the 'Double' Self

At the beginning of his Confessions, De Quincey gives an apology to his public for "tearing away that decent drapery" that was for the 19th century readership, a ubiquitous instalment in literature. An expose of personal suffering was not to be taken beyond the confines of the private self, and De Quincey, beginning his Confessions, is reduced to a nervous admittance of this fact. Nonetheless, his subject matter, the ordeal of his opium addiction, drives him on to overcome whatever gentlemanly, perfunctory behaviour has been instilled in him. He does, in fact, tear down that "decent drapery" that his Romantic colleagues had not been able to forego, but instead finds an alternative, through the objectification of nature. The torment of his addiction that affected so deeply his subconscious mind required an unveiling of his private self. It is not possible to write about "the burden of such horrors" with the language of the social self; the gentlemanly persona. His social conditioning is apparent in the tremulous nature of his beginning, in itself, an act of gentlemanly decorum. The concern with "propriety" has held back unimaginable literary potential. De Quincey, however, regarded it as imperative to write of the personal, and to go beyond that: to write of the subconscious terrain of the mind; his dream-life, where lay the greatest source of his suffering. "What took place in my dreams" is his moral declaration for this piece of extraordinary writing. Even before the advent of Freud, De Quincey recognized the importance of communicating that clandestine and shadowy world so far beyond the reach or understanding of the British drawing room. It was an act of tremendous courage to recognize that his venturing was not into the sores of his "moral ulcers or scars" but, rather, into that 'heart of darkness' that lies at the bottom of all our psychic bowels. How did he justify this venture? By awarding himself the recognition of his life as the "life of a philosopher".
The legacy of De Quincey whose way of writing, "is to think aloud and follow [his] own humours" without much consideration of "who is listening to [him]" can be traced to the shattering of the boundary between art and life following the decline of Modernism. E.M. Forster’s plaintive cry of "art for art’s sake" was slowly fading into the distance on the literary horizon. Art, literature, has and always will mimic life to some degree. The form of this mimesis will change as the years change the writer, the style of his craft, and its substance. Writing is inherently a subjective matter. It comes from the self and it serves the self. It is, after all, what a writer has chosen to do with his life, so he had better have something good to say. Like De Quincey, the writer believes that what he has to say needs to be heard by an audience, whether large or small. For De Quincey, it was not only those fellow sufferers of opium addiction that he wrote, but on a larger and more important level, for all those interested in confronting the unconscious. In his study of Plath, Al Strangeways explores the poet’s academic career through the texts studied by Plath at Smith College. The Confessions of De Quincey feature significantly among these texts. Plath’s Smith text, Van Doren Stern’s The Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, expounds the idea of De Quincey as a writer whose aim in writing was to enter into "the innermost recesses of the subconscious mind": in other words, a writer in search of an expanded consciousness, or H.D.’s “overmind lens” (Van Doren Stern 16).

Plath’s own interest in the ‘subconscious mind’ is glimpsed in her editing of Van Doren Stern’s text. Her emphasis of “the shadowy domain of nomenal substance” points to her particular interest in the subconscious world of dreams, a subject that is documented repeatedly in her Journals. In his introduction, Strangeways associates Plath with the typical Romantic
dilemma of the subjective/emotional or sincere self trapped in an irreconcilable relationship to
the objective/intellectual self (Strangeways 17). Strangeways is, perhaps, too glad to see Plath
fall neatly into the Romantic paradigm and over-argues the case for Plath, the Romantic. She is
not, as Al Strangeways argues, rooted in the Romantic tradition of conflict between these two
spheres: “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling . . . its origin from emotion recollected in
tranquillity” (Wordsworth: 64). It is De Quincey who links the world of dreams to childhood
traumas - as later - Freud was to do. Dreams, according to De Quincey, hide the “deep tragedies
of infancy” that “remain lurking below all . . . to the last” (De Quincey 146). In his Confessions,
De Quincey exhorts the value of the “biographical” dream, rooted in early childhood trauma, in
order to enter the subconscious mind and achieve new vision (Strangeways 68-9). De Quincey’s
exploration of the dream world prefigures the Freudian psychology popular in the U.S. and
Britain of the 1950’s. The contemporaneity of De Quincey in relation to Freudian psychology
perhaps explains Plath’s own interest in the subject - a subject explored in poems such as
‘Daddy’ and ‘Medusa’.

The Freudian Dream State or the visionary experience of De Quincey becomes a means
of re-entering history, a corridor to the past. Plath’s poem ‘The Eye Mote’ (CP 109) explores a
past consciousness in what Robert Lowell’s has described in his introduction to Ariel as
“controlled hallucination”:

Blind to what will be and what was

I dream that I am Oedipus.
What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife,
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis;
Horses fluent in the wind,
A place, a time gone out of mind (CP 109).

Poetry becomes a means of snatching at and then altering the past. For Plath, the past is her father whose premature death aligns her, in Freudian terms, to Oedipus and his burden of guilt for Laius. Plath admits to the deliberateness of her vision, constructed as it is, purely subjectively: "Blind to what will be and what was/ I dream that I am Oedipus". The realisation of an altered consciousness is perceptible in the ‘double’ consciousness of some of Plath’s poems, an interest that can be traced to the subject of her Master’s thesis at Smith College on Dostoyevsky. As Lynda B Salamon has noted in her essay ‘Double, Double’: Perception in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, beneath the pastoral idyll of the early Colossus poems we sense the lurking presence of the ‘uncanny’ and the ‘horrible’. Salamon notes that in ‘Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows’ (CP 111-12) the vision of a pastoral paradise flickers away for a moment to a glimpse of a crueler reality: the “blood-berried hawthorn” with its “spines of white”. A serene and mild nature is replaced by a vision of a cruel and vindictive creation. The final lines of the poem surrender to this vision: “How is such mild air/ The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out” (Salamon 34). Again, in the mock Romantic ‘Spinster’ (CP 49-50), a cursory romance is converted to a gothic tale as a blithe spring walk is dispelled by the presence of winter:
Observed her lover’s gestures unbalance the air,
His gait stray uneven
Through a rank wilderness of fern and flower.
She judged petals in disarray,
The whole season, sloven.

How she longed for winter then!-
Scrupulously austere in its order
Of white and black
Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,
And heart’s frosty discipline
Exact as a snowflake (CP 49-50).

The sudden transference of mood is an indication of Plath’s real focus – toward the dark side of the moon. The rest is a fleeting romance.

Plath’s preoccupation with the idea of a ‘double’ vision is transferred to Esther’s dilemma in The Bell Jar, caught as she is between two states of being:

I am neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country of the city . . . If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then
I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days (76).

V: True and False Selves: The Fifties' Existential Crisis

Is this the 'double-bind' situation, as defined by Bateson et al, in which "the 'victim' [is] caught in a triangle of paradoxical injunctions, or of attributions having the force of injunctions" and, is therefore unable to "do the right thing" (qtd. Laing, 1961: 125-31). Is this in fact, the double vision of a young woman caught between two worlds, unable to attain either? Does this make Esther 'schizoid' as R.D. Laing describes in The Divided Self (1966), and as David Holbrook has argued in regard to Plath's poetic vision, a paradigm in which the 'real' self is an abrogation of the 'false' self? The dichotomy of 'real' and 'false' self is experienced, in the case of Esther Greenwood, as an existential crisis. The conflicting criteria of what constitutes a bold 'feminine' identity elides her 'real' self, and she finds herself flitting back and forth between a series of elusive and impermanent false selves. The social construct of femininity that Esther wrestles with is based on the fifties valorisation of the nuclear family in which the female role becomes one of surrender to 'feminine' roles. These roles disavow the inner life of the woman, and she becomes, instead, the object of her family and society. The female, struggling to retain some sense of inner life finds only a facile series of social rituals, none of which satisfies her sense of a 'real' self. Esther Greenwood is Plath's embodiment of the fifties female who, confronting the void of true self, undergoes the process of disintegration necessary for this harsh adjustment. The "stifling distortions" of the bell jar are perhaps the closest that Esther will get to
glimpse the risk and the reality of a 'real' self. Susan Bassnett, in her critical study of Plath, declares that the inappropriate and inaccurate readings of Plath can be attributed to the "lack of any definition of power which transforms rather than coerces". She continues this point by quoting feminist poet and critic Adrienne Rich who describes this kind of power as "ourselves as we are/ in painful relations of staying "cognizant": power as pain, accuracy and complexity". Rich concludes: "Sylvia Plath's voice is powerful because it succeeds in encompassing - not negating - vital contradictions" (Bassnett 5). Those "contradictions" are social in origin and mimic the social constructs that define 'femininity', femininity with Freudian origins. Betty Friedan recognized the nascent Freudianism of the 1950's in the phenomenon of the feminine mystique. In 1963 she writes:

The feminine mystique derived its power from Freudian thought; for it was an idea born of Freud which led women and those who studied him, to misinterpret their mothers’ frustrations and their fathers’ and brothers’ and husbands’ resentment and inadequacies, and their own emotions and possible choices in life. It is a Freudian idea, hardened into apparent fact, that has trapped so many women today (Friedan 103).

Friedan alludes to the famous essay, “The Psychology of Women”, in which Freud declared the psychological inferiority of a woman who “frequently staggers us by her psychological rigidity and unchangeability . . . There are no paths open to her future development (Freud 184). This statement became the basis of the fifties bible on the psychology of women – Farnham and Lundberg’s Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947), a text that declared feminism to be a “deep illness” on the premise that “it is not in the capacity of the female
organism to attain feelings of well-being by the route of male achievement”. Furthermore, it was “the error of the feminists that they attempted to put women on the essentially male road of exploit, off the female road of nurture (Farnham & Lundberg 142). Another staple text of fifties female psychology was Helene Deutsch’s The Psychology of Woman – A Psychoanalytical Interpretation (1944). Deutsch’s text affirmed Freud’s posit that women were in, fact, biologically inferior to their male counter-parts. Deutsch writes: "While fully recognising that woman’s position is subjected to external influence, I venture to say that the fundamental identities “feminine-passive” and “masculine-active” assert themselves in all known races and cultures, in various forms and quantitative proportions” (224).

Deutsch was an exponent of the Freudian theory that “normal femininity” involved the woman renouncing all personal goals for the sake of serving her husband and son, and any activity a woman did undertake to achieve personal realisation was a reflection of the Freudian “masculinity complex” (Friedan 121). The widespread adherence to Freudian psychology in the 1950’s was, as Friedan observes, something of “an all-embracing American ideology, a new religion”. Friedan continues:

It filled the vacuum of thought and purpose that existed for many for whom God, or flag, or bank account were no longer sufficient . . . It provided a convenient escape from the atom bomb, McCarthy, all the disconcerting problems that might spoil the taste of steaks, and cars and color television and backyard swimming pools . . . It gave us permission to suppress the troubling questions of the larger world and pursue our own personal pleasures (122).
Freudianism, then, as Friedan concludes, was a safety blanket beneath which the American citizen, particularly the male citizen could hide from the existential realities of atomic warfare, racism and social inequalities, materialism and the fifties terror of a communist infiltration.

VI: The "Girl who would be God": The Fifties Female in Search of Transcendence

The self in search of transcendence from its social and cultural self: this is the gist of Plath's preoccupation in her writing; in the act of writing itself, and in its substance. Motherhood or marriage does not replace that need for personal vocation; a peculiar calling. She dreams that "dream of independence" as Friedan called it. It was the craving of her alter ego, "the girl who would be God" as Plath wrote, aged 9, in her journals. But was there a place for such individual ambition in the culture of the 1950's and early 1960's. Was the American culture of the time prepared to tolerate the grandiose ideas of the individual?

The System and the Consensus:

In American Poetry and Culture, 1945-80, Robert von Hallberg discusses the phenomenon of the fifties propensity for a national consensus or ideology. In 1950 President Eisenhower founded the American Assembly at Columbia University where he was then president. In the late 50's, this assembly was commissioned by Eisenhower to produce a national policy document that would define the objectives of America for the coming decade. This
became the book-length "Goals for Americans", a national mission statement produced by a committee of academics, public officials, editors, businessmen and labour leaders. This piece of literature was to serve as the written testament to key American ideologies. Von Hallberg notes that the significance at this point is the ease with which Eisenhower was able to commission such a national consensus, and then to publish it in the form of a book. The scattering of American opinion that followed the war had obviously been gathered together by the mid-fifties. The unity of consensus of "Goals for Americans" was proof of the ushering in of a new collective consciousness in the upper echelons of American society - from the political and academic worlds. It was from the university, the homestead of De Quincey's "philosopher" that this consensus of thought was to emerge.

"The value of the individual is preeminent among other allegiances, declares Eisenhower's "Goals of Americans" (Hallberg 3). Yet within the industrial landscape of the 1950's the pledge for the end of the reign of individualism was being called for. Peter Drucker wrote in his 1950, "The New Society: The Anatomy of the Industrial Order" that it was the organisation itself that supported the role of the individual that was most productive in the industrial system. The individual was but a cog in the great machine. The rise of systems analysis within the fields of sociology, politics and international relations supported this notion of the need for an overriding consensus, an ideology. Writing for the International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, Talcott Parsons expounded the need to overturn the "long tradition that a society is 'composed' or made up of individuals". The era of history comprised of the acts of great individuals was being hailed as at an end. The decades of the fifties and 60's marked the beginning of electronic communication, cybernetics and the computer age in which the
individual was to become nothing more than a role within the particular system to which he belonged. These systems, Parsons writes, will lead ultimately to "neither personalities nor social systems [having direct contact with the ultimate object of reference."

(qtd. Hallberg: 4). Insight, communication, all this will take place within a mediating space; meaning itself will only be reached through the process of mediation. The result of this vision of systems analysis was to create a post-war culture in which the jurisdiction of knowledge was organized into pockets of experts whose skills and experience were designed to deal with specific tasks. All this was, as von Hallberg observes, for the sake of better production and efficiency.

Von Hallberg explores the effects works such as Norbert Weiner's "Cybernetics" (1949) and the whole theory of systematic social organisation was to have on the young poets of the 1950's avant-garde. Poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, John Ashberry, Gary Snyder, awoke to the realization of what an effect such a syndicated social organisation would have upon the more profound metaphysical institutions of life: love, marriage, human relationships. Von Hallberg quotes Robert Creeley's "After Lorca", a poem that observes systemised social behaviour with its strange juxtapositions:

The church is a business, and the rich
are the business men.

When they pull on the bells, the
poor come piling in and when a poor man dies, he as a wooden cross, and they rush through the ceremony.

But when a rich man dies, they
drag out the Sacrament
and a golden Cross, and go *doucement, doucement*
to the cemetery (Hallberg 40)

The patterning of social behaviour thus becomes the substance of Creeley’s poems. He gains creative sustenance from the regularity and predictability of social situations. They become embodied literally as the rhythm of his poems as seen in his poem of that name: “It’s all a rhythm/ from the shutting/ door, to the window/ opening”. The systemisation of society has supplied Creeley with his intellectual and creative fodder. It organises everything for him; keeps him within tight straits. He is like the people of his poem “Return”: he remains in the ‘proper places’, “Quiet as is proper for such places”. And we know that like the predictable types of those quiet places, Creeley will “be there always” (Hallberg 40-41).

This modularised society of the systems analyst vision holds no place for the anomie of the writing of Plath. The rudeness of “Daddy” and Lady Lazarus” are never quiet in the proper places. These poems are like the antiquated madhouses of the 19th century: everything within screams out with rage and indignation at the predicament in which it finds itself. Plath’s poems are proponents of the 50’s liberalism set down in the “Goals for Americans” in which the individual holds pre-eminence. Plath’s version of individuality is the subjective experience of the inner life; she confers with no mediating agency except herself. There are no components within her vision except the individual self. In Plath’s vision, standardisation of behaviour is impossible.
The psychological valences of Plath’s poems are not compatible with any kind of consensus, be it the liberal one of individual pre-eminence or the non-liberal subsumable individual. In Plath’s cosmos the emotions of life will never be reduced to the “small variant” in Ashberry’s poem ‘Soonest Mended’. Everything she writes of exists on an emotional plane of huge variables. She is able to manipulate the lack of consensus in her multiple poetic selves to produce an explosive fusion. Although her journals clearly reveal Plath’s political persuasion to be of the liberal bent, standing against presidencies whose systemised policies included support of the atom bomb, British and American interference in the Suez affair, and Communist witch-hunting, her poetic personas escape classification. In some instances, as in ‘Daddy’ (CP 222-24) or ‘Lady Lazarus’ (CP 244-47) Plath’s rhetoric takes on the attitude of a fascist dictator. This is for effect, but nonetheless it proves that Plath’s voice strongly deviates from the more appropriated world of Creeley, or even Ashberry.

There is an essential lawlessness in Plath’s wake. In some senses her poetry beckons the anarchy of the sixties revolution in its temperamental, capricious shifts of mood. In another sense the vicious dictatorial spin of her word with its dead-end vision on death conjures up the memory of the fascist thirties. We mustn’t forget that this is part of Plath’s dramatic purpose, but still it demonstrates to her reader how far outside the contemporary objectist system she lay. For the emerging objectists of the Black Mountain Academy, the ego as subject and the whole notion of a subject itself was repudiated. Pound, the primary influence on objectist thinking rejected ‘the obscure reveries of the inward gaze’. Charles Olson defined Objectism as the process of eliminating “the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a
creature of nature, which we may, with no derogation, call objects” (Olson 1997: 247). The excruciatingly personal coloration of Plath’s verse stands in sharp contrast to the objectist principle of self-erasure. Theirs was an institutionalised objective: recognised, established and with a group of adherents. Plath’s writing was outside the bounds of any formal poetic movement. Posthumous attempts to pin her to a literary board have been the clumsy abortive flaying of a few of the academic persuasion, whose sense of security demands a definition. Plath stood outside the bounds of an established literary movement. Her writing was a process of self-definition and self-creation. Its purpose was the evolution of her unconscious mind without the strict sense of place of the objectists. Plath moved beyond any social definition of place as a woman or as an American citizen. There were no institutional boundaries around her work. It was the writing of her psychic destiny; a séance with herself.

VII: The "still blue" hour: Writing in Domesticity, Poet Beyond the System

In her writing, Plath trod outside the system. As a woman, she was trapped by the offerings of that system. Marriage and children were indisputable obstacles to her work and compelled her toward isolation, the “still blue, almost eternal hour” of the night. These anti-social hours became the possession of her creative self, claimed in defiance of her socialised self. The system that denies her creative self was being ignored; vandalised. In his The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid-Century (1977), Geoffrey Thurley describes the so-called “breakdown” writers: Plath, Sexton, Ashberry, and Lowell, as “gifted introverts”. Again, the term “breakdown” suggests the need to categorise the difficult experience of the liminal in the writing of these poets and the term ignores the true essence of their work. In such a reading the
subject matter replaces the poetry itself. The centrality of Pound’s ‘sublime ego’ prevents such a reader from moving ahead. Eleanor Taylor Ross in an interview for The Southern Review speaks of such critics (she cites Seamus Heaney) who view Plath’s work as limited because of “its dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition” (Valentine 792). Her response legitimises the value of such self-discovery on account of its newness in the history of women writers. Its newness necessitates a personal voyage as it marks the beginning of female writing in the historical, cultural and spiritual sense.

Such novelty in the history of women writing explains Plath’s inability to “get clear in time of the dilemma between dependence (everything she had been taught and given, everything she had chosen, except in her art), and her creative independence, relatively new in the world as well as in her own life” (Valentine 792). The newborn nature of Plath’s literary condition was, in the end, her worst enemy. Like a new mother, she was learning to wean her literary self and its fledging state became too vulnerable even for her to nurse. Like her predecessor, Woolf, Plath was writing the new literature of women; like Woolf, the very act of her writing within domestic territory was furthering the social frontier of women. Thus the personal ‘revelatory’ style of Plath’s art was both serving the creative individual of a new order of womanhood, but also pushing the woman of the fifties closer and closer to social autonomy. By breaking down the door of the Bastille that had kept women for so long chained to an old order of domestic and social propriety, Plath was creating the future social destiny of women in which personal and creative independence could be assimilated into the roles of motherhood and wife.
Plath’s killing of the “Angel in the House” was a more modern and perhaps pragmatic method than Woolf’s. She simply became a ruthless organiser of her various selves. When she was not afflicted with her depressive illness she was able to achieve efficient production in all areas of her life: social (domestic) and creative. However, the ‘system’ she had forged for herself became impossible to sustain once the balance of her mind was upset. The ‘system’ itself was a foe to the psychic disorder that flew in with its own ruthless cycle of elation and despair. The systematised behaviour of manic depression cannot sustain any imposed ideology, and thus the liberation that she had fought so hard from domestic (social) oppression collapsed around her. The poems of the final months of her life are a testament to the collapse of the new order she had built around her. With an appalling irony, they are the greatest moments of her art. The independence she had achieved for the short period of her married life was devastated by the onslaught of her mania. The reasons for this eruption are too evasive and personal a matter ever to be known. Perhaps it was the high demands of her own ‘efficient’ system of liberation that finally became too much for her, the thin tight rope she walked between domestic and creative harmony and personal misery.

**The Social Creature and The Creative Being**

As both a self-determined individual and a social creature, Plath was always to be at war with either one or the other. Each jostled for her attention. The personal mode of her art was part of her artillery against her social definition. It was her private, disenfranchised lens; a pair of opera glasses, not rented, but bought. Through these lenses she could view the world as she wished to regard it, and because of the vastness of the choice that lay before her, she was able to
view it mythically. In doing so, she divorced herself from any connection between her socially and creatively defined selves. It was her personal panacea to the conflict.

The ousting of the “Angel” was merely a matter of recognising the umbilical link between her domestic and creative personas. Plath was able to exploit the relationship between the two so effectively that it became not only the form of her writing but also her chief subject matter. From there, she could launch herself into a mythic world involving all the characters of her personal drama: her husband, whose understudy was her father, her mother, children and then, her numerous protagonist selves in relation to cast characters. The valances in her relationships between these characters became dependent upon the particular role she perceived herself as playing in her own life: the social creature or the independent creative being. The current preference in sociology to view the individual as having an express choice to “choose who they are” is a symptom of the topical “identity politics” of the 1990’s. Mary Evans, in her February 1993 article for *Sociology*, “Reading Lives: How the Personal might be Social” analyses this emphasis on social autonomy and individualism as part of the post-modern predisposition to attack the validity of the institutionalised meta-narratives of history. It is part of the same general consensus that was branded about under the Eisenhower presidency for the individual’s pre-eminence but which had little to do with actual social infrastructure.

Contemporary social ideologues, however, have witnessed the invasion into American mass culture of the “create your own reality” lifestyle principle, while everyone, naturally, does what everyone else is doing. And that, of course, is whatever the dictates of popular culture may be. We are socially constructed beings. The path of individual determinism is a hard one to
follow, but it is nice to kid ourselves into thinking that we could if we chose to. In the ‘90’s, the
individual is a deified being in theory; and while sociologists emphasise his pre-eminence in the
shaping of the social order, ultimately, it is only a whim for kitsch democratic principles and the
toppling of the old order of history that has brought that about. Plath herself remained a part of a
social order her entire life. She desired to be part of a feminine universe that allowed her to cook
and clean with gusto. She desired more to be a famed writer, but her journals document her clear
need to be the bustling matron of the house, a sort of superwoman, capable of inaugurating a
state of creative excellence in the domestic and literary halves of her life. She desired the
personal independence that writing gave her but she was also prey to the fifties female
journalistic fantasies of a domestic Arcadia.

**Love-Hate: The 'Angel' and the Mother-Daughter Legacy**

This feminine fantasia was Plath’s inheritance from her mother. The ‘Angel’ in Aurelia
Plath had never been throttled and indeed, served the aggrandisement of her husband’s
professional achievements at the cost of her own achievements. That same ‘Angel’ also served
the demands of her daughter’s education and literary career, working to pay their financial
demands, and then, after the death of her daughter, acting as one of the benefactors of Plath’s
literary estate. She was that Edwardian paragon who, in the words of Woolf:

> excelled in the difficult arts of the family life” and “sacrificed herself daily. If
there was chicken she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it – in
short, she was so contrived that she never had a mind or wish of her own. (Woolf, 1993: 102).

As her literary bodyguard, her mother served her well; but, as her role model for womanhood, she only led her back into the dark and stuffy confinements of the Victorian sitting room. “Perfection is terrible”, Plath writes in the 'Munich Mannequins' (CP 262). The perfection of the ‘Angel’ is terrible. “It cannot have children”. It resides on a thin film between the human and the inhuman, what is possible and what is impossible: it is “the absolute sacrifice”. It is suttee committed against one’s self and it ends in “voicelessness”. The ‘Angel’ glitters like the mannequins in the snow; “a moment’s ornament” (Gilbert & Gubar 136) whose radiance suffuses all those around them with its seemingly effortless self-effacement. The inherited ‘Angel’ had to be erased. This became the task of the woman of letters, the literary, self-made Plath. As long as she was writing she was keeping at bay the piercing white light of that “glittering and digesting” altruism. In a letter to her brother, Warren, Plath writes of her fear of the all-consuming threat of the ‘Angel’ in her mother. She treats it like a sickness, the obverse of her own depression with its cyclonic rage. Both are destroyers:

It is a frightening fact that, mother would actually kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realized lately that we have to fight against her selflessness as we would fight against a deadly disease. After extracting her life blood and care for 20 years we should start bringing in big dividends of joy for her (L. H. 112-113).
So Plath has two enemies to ward off: the ‘Angel’ who would have her existing only as an enabler in the lives of others, and the devouring monster of her illness that becomes the crucible of her strongest creative achievements. The ‘Angel’ is defeated as her hopes for the “perfection” of her conjugal life disappears with her separation from Hughes. This enables her, in the last months of her life through the “Ariel” poems, to plunge freely into the “stasis in darkness” of the mouth of the monster. Without the ‘Angel’ there would be no monster, but once the hopes of the ‘Angel’ are quelled, the monster is free to rout her out. Ultimately, Plath is compelled to give up on the notion of what Friedan termed the ‘feminine mystique’ in her personal life. It is a fantasy that does not survive the reality of the circumstances of her emotional life. Losing her Zeus, she also loses her Olympia and the realm of the Elysian domesticity whose existence had eluded her for so long.

Hughes writes of the trauma of her fractured self in his “Notes to the Poems of Sylvia Plath”. Her work exhibited “the central experience of a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again, or finding a new one” (81). The failure of the invisible art of the ‘feminine mystique’ with its threat of erasure to her self is replaced by the image of a death mask; the white light is absorbed by the dark shadows of death, her new preoccupation. As many of her female contemporaries turned to tranquillisers as though they were cough-drops, (Friedan 31). Plath turned to death as a sedative to the pain of the skewer in her side: the dead ‘Angel at her side she was now forced to bury.
The theme of erasure goes a long way to explain the revealing nature of Plath’s work. For one who had suffered and feared personal erasure for so long, it is logical that she should turn to the indelible colours of the poetry of the “I”. And so fate of the “I” become the theme of her poems: rage against a dead father, an ambivalence toward her surviving mother, the ecstasy and agony of her marriage, the burden of motherhood and domesticity. We are suffused with a personal story, but Plath is clever enough to set up a V.I.P. enclosure that we are never allowed to step beyond. This remains the designated area of the speaker, the poet. Plath herself is guest speaker and she chooses to address her audience from the restricted and privileged podium of her stage. The guarded safety of her position allows such casual divulgence as that of the ‘Lady Lazarus’ announcement:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it – (CP 244)

It would be easy to declare this confessional writing: the lack of affect, the declaratory air, and the insouciance of her tone. Later, in the same poem, Plath tells us with the same insouciance:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well (CP 245).
But isn’t this rather dramatic statement part of Plath’s repertoire, designed to shock, to stir the reader from the weight of metaphors that immerses the poem – the heavy guilt of herself as Jewish victim in the hands of “Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy” (CP 246). Plath has played with her role as victim and we, collectively, as victimiser. There is an accusatory tone we cannot ignore.

Plath is directing her anger toward the reader as much as she does toward the personae of her “Herrs”. If this were confessional writing surely we would sense a loss of self-esteem, of self-control implied in the act of confession. Yet here, in ‘Lady Lazarus’, at the height of her poetic development, Plath has never been more in control, more emotionally manipulative of her reader. The Yeatsian mask she wears is of the self-victimised: an anti-self, a deliberate projection away from an authentic self. Plath is not the abject creature of confession here, but rather, the poet who has so mastered her “troupe” of selves that she is able to pull, from among them, a self that creates the most effective and shocking presence upon her reader. That is not the purpose of one who confesses; it is the purpose of a great technician whose rhetorical skills, instead of prompting herself to confession, lead her listener to a degree of symbiotic confession with the personae of her aggressors. We cannot call her writing confessional in the sense that she divulges an authentic self. Instead, she divulges panoply of players. It is, in the words of Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, as if the self is:

A variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself – a troupe of players that I have internalised, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when
a self is required. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater (The CounterLife
23).

What Ted Hughes terms in his Foreword to the Journals the “inner drama” surfaces with
deliberate nonchalance. She tells us coolly, that she “has done it again”, tried to kill herself;
(CP244) or that she has cut the top of her thumb “instead of an onion”(CP235); or that she has
killed the memory of her “daddy” that has haunted her for so long (CP 221). She tells us all this,
but it is not really “us” she tells’ ‘though we are her readers, and she desired above all else to
have her poems read. She tells us only because we read her poems; but first she told herself as
she told the multifarious selves of her journals. It is through the act of telling that resolution
comes about.

Robert Bly, critic of the 'confessional' style of poetry, believed poetry “should bring news
from the universe”, a statement that formed part of his manifesto published in his magazine for
new poets, The Sixties. His essay, “The Dead World and the Live World” (Spring 1966)
separates poets of the modern era into two categories: those who write from an ego locked into
itself and those who are able to write a type of poetry that “reaches out in waves over everything
that is alive”. He argued that the American literary scene was dominated by writers that turned
their backs upon the larger frame of existence, beyond the self. This type of writer “regard the ‘I’
as something independent, isolated, entire in itself, and they throw themselves into studying its
turns and impulses” (Bly, 1966: 2-7). Social alienation has become merely an excuse for self-
absorption.
The work of Sylvia Plath reaches out to images beyond the existence of the poet, but only if the image extends the concept of the self within its own mythology. If the suit doesn’t fit it isn’t worn. In the case of Plath that suit is a mythology that allows her to play the role of victimised and oppressed woman, mother, wife and daughter. The larger world only existed if it fitted her poetic purpose. Her references to the social realities of her time, the Korean War, the horror of the atom bomb, the holocaust; even the more immediate social reality of which she was a part - the boredom and frustration among American housewives of the fifties - meet the vortex of her images only if they serve to extend the realm of the poetic self. Sylvia had a sense of something real beyond her own ego, but she was unable to disassociate the image of herself from the larger social, political and historical realities. The image of Sylvia Plath glares through the spaces on the horizon. She is the quotient point.

IX: News From Suburbia, News of "the Human Mind": A "Real Live World" Within

Plath’s poetry is a journey into the interior. Bly’s manifesto was concerned with urging young poets to enter their interior world, the place of the “deep image”, in order that they may enrich the ‘live world’ through the experience of the inner. This inner world was to bring new energy to the ‘surface’ world, a kind of spiritual energy that would improve the moral climate of the world above. Poetry that remained too far below, submerged in the ego, would not serve the purpose of enriching the outer world. It would only cause the poet to suffocate on the inflation of his ego. Bly adopts the term of Georg Groddeck, the “Grott-natur”, interpreted by Bly as “holy-
nature”: “The “Grott-natur” senses the interdependence of all things alive, and longs to bring them all inside a work of art. The work of these poets is an elaborate expression of the “Grott-natur”. What results is a calmness” (Bly, 1980: 281).

What Bly is calling for, in fact, is a more balanced purpose for poetry. Poetry of the “new imagination” was to turn the inward journey into some form of action. Bly was calling for a larger frame of reference for poetry, in which poetic thought and image would share the burden of social and political conscience. Inwardness was not enough if it had no practical translation in the real world. Can the work of Sylvia Plath, so utterly inward in its direction, claim its own manifesto or purpose? The purpose of Plath’s writing is stated over and over again in her journals and letters as a desire for fame. She wished to surpass all her contemporaries in achieving that fame and was constantly looking over her shoulder at the achievements of her rivals: Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, George Starbuck and others. Her choice of arena for her writing was the established mainstream journals of her time, in particular, The New Yorker and Ladies Home Journal. The latter reflects Plath’s complete membership in the culture of the middle-class suburban housewife for which the Ladies Home Journal was the bible. Perhaps we can see purpose in Plath’s desperate attempts to gain recognition in this arena as a need to rise above the stultifying, self-eradication of suburban anonymity. Publication in the Ladies Home Journal would mean that she, Plath, had managed to stamp her image upon this world of homogenous and conformist existence. Ted Hughes, in his introduction to Plath’s short stories and prose Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams (1978) writes of Plath’s burning desire to become part of the “high-power, practical, popular American type” of writer (JP 2). This kind of popular achievement would lead Plath out of the deadening grip of that “American Dream” that
had a hold over women of her class and generation. Anne Sexton refers to a "buried self" that lay beneath the nullifying layers of her middle-class existence:

"Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white cake and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children (Sexton 311)."

The "buried self" of Anne Sexton does not produce the kind of poetry Bly was calling for. Although Plath belongs to the same "buried" generation of women as Sexton, yet there is a movement, a trajectory in Plath's work that shoots beyond this burial. Her images of self-renunciation, particularly in her Ariel poems, reveal a woman desperate to resurrect herself from her own psychic burial. There is a woman wading through the layers of psychic distress toward, what becomes the unfettered image of Ariel herself sweeping from the "stasis in darkness" toward the "red eye, the cauldron of morning". Plath's passage from "stasis" to flight as she psychically "unpeels" the "dead hands, dead stringencies" that have held her captive is a passage that moves toward renewal. The great sadness of this passage is that renewal must first lead to death, to an act of murder through the purgatory "red eye of morning". Plath does not want to remain "substance less" even if that means donning the garb of death. Life is achieved through a progression into the inner passage, as in Dante's Purgatory, where she eats the substance of death itself that lingers like a fantasy within her; the "Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows" ('Ariel', CP 239) that she craves like an addiction. This is the passage toward renewed life; this
is the way out of the monotony of a suburban ‘death’ that allows her to linger too long and with too much relish in the dark recesses of her interior life.

This kind of ghoulish writing is the antithesis of the sedate world of the *Ladies Home Journal*. This is not something to be read with cherry cake and tea. As she desires the norms of her society, the warm and cosy world of the “Ladies Home Journal”, Plath also subconsciously yearns to defy and defile that world with her “drive into the red eye” of self-destructive rage. While the world of the *Ladies Home Journal* stands as a monument to middle-class self-preservation, Plath drags up the “buried” layers of self that lie beneath that monument of propriety; a self gorging upon those “Black sweet blood mouthfuls” of its own dark shadows.

Bly accuses the ‘confessional’ poets of not bringing “news of the universe”, only “news of the human mind” (Bly, 1980: 283). Surely a writer like Sylvia Plath, and even Anne Sexton, brings news of their part of the universe? The numbing world of middle-class suburbia was a large part of the American ‘universe’ in the 1950’s and 60’s. It held captive many minds in its nullifying grip. It was a reality that writers such as Plath and Sexton were desperate to survive, to chip their way out of so that they could join the rest of humanity, the other poets of the “new imagination”. The poetry of Plath repeatedly demonstrates this need to climb out of the wreckage of her ‘dead’ middle-class life to join the “live” world beyond. The descent into the inner was the beginning of that process of self-circumspection that would pull Plath out of the wreckage. There was no ‘inner’ to the life lead by millions of women of the fifties. There was a need to create that inner life, and for many that came through the fantasy of pulp fiction or popular romance or, indeed, the writing of the *Ladies Home Journal* and other women’s magazines. For women like
Plath and Sexton the inner life came through their own writing. Writing was the first step toward building a real “live world” within.

It is precisely because Plath was aware of the desiccated state of her ‘part of the universe’ that she chose to write about it. She dug deep and she found that energy within herself and her writing that was her own claim to the “Gott-natur”. She was a spokesperson for a universe made up of women living lives of tremendous inertia. Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking work, The Feminine Mystique (1963), pinpoints the root of the malady of the suburban housewife as those chains that held them, “made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices”. Women were entering a type of domestic religious order in which perfunctory rituals wove around their lives so tightly that there was no room remaining for personal evolution. This suffocating lifestyle led many housewives to take tranquillisers “like cough drops” (Friedan 31) to numb the sense of meaninglessness they faced daily. The universe that had shaped these women was to be found in the pages and on the covers of mainstream women’s magazines such as McCall’s, Redbook, Good housekeeping, Women’s Home Companion and Ladies Home Journal. Such journals were dedicated to preserving the “mystique” of the woman as something utterly removed from the darker side of the feminine, what Robert Bly calls “the Death Mother” found in the image of such deities as the Indian goddess Kali (Bly, 1980: 224-5). The “Death Mother” incites the “death wish” which is the persona of Plath’s “Ariel” driving into the “red-eye of morning”. The embodiment of the “Death Mother” is the balancing factor in the feminine. The women of Ladies Home Journal were cartoon caricatures of the “good mother” aspect, the homemaker, the nurturer, the compatible mate and the womb. They were, in the words of Friedan, a much-reduced version of the Mother:
“young, frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home” (Friedan 31). Her only passion was the pursuit of a man so that she could create a world into which she could cram “food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture,” and her physical self. Friedan quotes the words of an editor of one of these women’s magazines:

Our readers are housewives, full time. They’re not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren’t interested in politics, unless it’s related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee. Humor? Has to be gentle, they don’t get satire. Travel? We have almost completely dropped it. Education? That’s a problem. Their own education level is going up. They’ve generally all had a high-school education and many, college. They’re tremendously interested in education for their children – fourth-grade arithmetic. You just can’t write about ideas or broad issues of the day for women. That’s why we’re publishing 90 per cent service now and 10 per cent general interest (Friedan 37).

The narrow world of women’s magazines offered its female readers nothing beyond their own marginal existence. Here, there is nothing to pull her out of the domestic sac that enclosed her. Even the media were conspiring to keep her ‘feminine and fluffy’. Nothing of any controversial nature ever had to bother her; nothing of the real world outside her daily domestic recital. This was the “news from the universe” of millions of stagnant women. It became the
substance of the “news from the human mind” of writer Sylvia Plath, compelled to burrow deeper than the shade of her kitchen or living room floor. Her poetry is the journey of a psyche in search of archetypes that would nurture the rage and resentment against the constricting silhouette of the fifties model of womanhood; a rage directed toward herself, as captive, and her society as captor.

In search of these archetypes, Plath does, in the words of Robert Bly, delve into the corners of her “evolutionary mind”, those “animal images that come from the animal... the animal life... images that are live and pick up things from evolution” (Bly 1980: 4). In her Ariel poems, she funnels psychically downwards toward primal images of the animal. Her Ariel poems are her flight away from her socialised, peremptory self. Like the woman of Lawrence’s story, “The Woman Who Rode Away”, the woman of the Ariel sequence is a woman in flight from the deadness of her quotidian life: “She was dead and she rode away to be reborn...This is her rebirth (Plath Essay, 1957). As she moves away from the woman of the earlier Colossus poems, she sheds the skins of a conscious social woman for the white flaky skin of a Godiva. The poet is reclothing herself in the form of a female deity. It is the process of self-transfiguration. As we move toward the climax of her poetic journey we witness a disrobing like that of Esther Greenwood on the roof of the Amazon hotel in The Bell Jar flinging the costumes of her social self to the ground below.
X: The Strip-Tease: The Continual Costume Change and Female Socialisation

Plath is aware of her constant costume changes. It is part of the socialisation of the fifties woman to have a “front door” and a “back door” face, while between them both, lie her dressing room. Within the space of her dressing room, the home, a process of perpetual transition occurs as the woman prepares herself for her next social role; her next costume. There is no time to discover a comfortable, authentic self. As one self is formed another is dissolving like “old whore petticoats” (‘Fever 103°’, CP 231). The woman must never be seen without her make-up on. Her cosmetic socialised self thus presents to the world an image of perfect consistency: “the same identical woman”, (‘Lady Lazarus’, CP 244) no matter what her inner state may be. “For the eyeing of [her] scars there is a charge”; “a very large charge”, says Plath. Nakedness is not permissible in the social context where the female spends most of her waking hours, so some other reality must be constructed to allow her to move around unobstructed by costume. Plath’s alternative reality is the drama of her poetry where she can tantalise, thrill and titillate her reader with a self-devised horror show. It is the series of female fantasies her alter egos have always desired. Now the flamboyant, exhibitionist can perform a series of strip teases in which layer after layer of skin is peeled back within the parameter of the poem. We are in a sacred and ritualised space. An Eleusinian mystery is unfolding. And so Plath wets our appetite for horror with “a word or a touch/ Or a bit of blood/ Or a piece of my hair or my clothes” (CP 246). None of this signifies confession. The woman is a tease, and we, spellbound, move in for a closer look. The maestro holds us captive.
Confession implies a submitting, weaker and, even, desperate self. There is a sense in which the ‘confessant’ is bound in some sense to a superior listener. Plath's writing is certainly self-reflexive, but it is no way bound to a superior source. Her poetry is, in the words of E.M. Cioran, poetry of "the ego in search of authenticity, thrown back upon itself; writing that, “in an unconscious propensity regard[s] [itself] as the centre, the cause, and the conclusion of Time” (Cioran 6). The self is the centre of the poet’s universe and this self toys with one guise and then another, as in role-playing. The girl who at the age of 9 wrote of “wanting to be God” has created her own godhead, and through this is able to confront the various forms of her devil: the ‘Herr Lucifers’ and ‘Doktors’ and “Daddy” that torment her and throw her into hiding in a multiplicity of selves. In the cosmos of her poetry Plath creates a ‘God of self’ that is able to achieve mastery over her tormentors, to reverse the role of victim and torturer and ascend itself to the level of tormentor. In The Divided Self R.D.Laing applies the term “false self system” when a schizoid individual develops a series of “part-selves none of which is so fully developed as to have a comprehensive ‘personality’ of its own” (Laing 76-78). Sylvia’s shards of selfhood are scattered throughout her poetry like stars in the Milky Way. On some nights, in some poems, a particular star is more visible than another.

Plath and Fifties Theatrics

The 'real' Sylvia Plath, according to her husband, Ted Hughes in his foreword for Sylvia’s Journals, began to emerge during the writing of the Ariel poems, and with it, a new language of self. Her “conflicting voices of the false and petty selves” that so often flare up in the journals as “camouflage cliché facades, defensive mechanisms, involuntary” are discarded.
She turns to the real “inner drama” and a braver creature comes into being, one who aims to both shock and titillate. The Ariel poems signify the undressing of Esther Greenwood of The Bell Jar. Beneath the socially controlled behaviour, the complicity of the self with the system, a female with a flair for the dramatic imminently awaits her debut. The debut of Plath’s authentic voice can be viewed within, what can be regarded as a general need for dramatic diversion in the political and cultural arena of the America of the 1950’s. There is no better example of this than the militaristic, and later the political exploits, of General Macarthur. Unlike Plath, Macarthur had no need to disrobe himself in order to engage in his amateur dramatics; his military garb allowed him to play as many roles as he chose, from his thrust up the Yalu River to confront the Chinese to the insurrection of the Philippines. His view of the world was one of narcissism, and as David Halberstam notes in The Fifties, he chose the ‘I’ pronoun more than any other. Halberstam cites his famous statement following his evacuation from the Philippines: “I shall return, not We” (Halberstam 80). Macarthur’s reign over the American military scene was largely based upon his need for the dramatic. Without it, life was inadequate; a good piece of the action was what was needed. Furthermore, the American people seemed to enjoy, with a certain pleasurable horror, the entertainment this self-created Hemingway hero provided. Dan Wakefield, writing for The Nation in his article “The Fifties”, cites a question posed to Dwight Eisenhower by a woman who wanted to know if he knew General Macarthur. Wakefield records Eisenhower’s response: “Not only have I met him, ma’am; I studied dramatics under him for five years in the Philippines” (Wakefield 80).

Halberstam’s The Fifties documents the antics of Macarthur and the other great hero of the burlesque, Senator Joseph McCarthy. His fuelling of what became a national paranoia grew
out of the same need for action that propelled Macarthur. America needed the Cold War to fuel its appetite for the dramatic. Life was becoming just too complacent. It whetted the nation’s appetite for the dangerous, and the enemy became the Communists:

McCarthy’s carnival-like four-year spree of accusations, charges and threats touched something deep in the American body politic, something that lasted long after his own recklessness, carelessness and boozing ended his career in shame. McCarthyism crystallized and politicized the anxieties of a nation living in a dangerous new era (Halberstam 52).

After the war things had become stale. The suburban life-style was spreading across the nation at a rapid rate and bringing with it a life-style of homogenisation. McCarthy’s paranoiac campaign against the ‘communist threat’ aroused the inhabitants of the slumbering suburbs and involved them in a campaign of fear. An era that produced houses en masse, that produced the first shopping mall on Long Island, and the whole vision of customer convenience, converged upon a nation still living out the memories of the war: a war with heroes, some of whom were still alive. The war had invoked a need for heroes in the American psyche - heroes with or without a cause.

And so the rebel figure was born as an anti-dote to the complacency and his calling: to replace the memory of those war heroes with new acts of glory. Macarthur was one of them, but he was to be replaced by a new breed, the Polaroid heroes of the 50’s screen. Marlon Brando in Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire was one. Later, there was James Dean, the “Rebel Without
a Cause". These rebel figures were the inevitable manifestation of a type who stood for the
defiance of the social system. Halberstam quotes a letter from Tennessee Williams to director
Elia Kazan urging him to direct his new play, "A Streetcar". It is a letter that underscores the
distortion of reality, layer upon layer of aberrations, the Hall of Mirrors of the fifties self-
perception:

Nobody sees anyone truly but through the flaws of their own egos. That is the
way we all see each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition – all such
distortions within our own egos – condition our vision of those in relation to us.
Add to these distortions in our own egos the corresponding distortions in egos of
others and you see how cloudy the glass must become through which we look at
each other (Halberstam 262).

The theatrics of the fifties protagonists are assimilated in the writing of Plath. The
process of self-development leads to acting out multifarious roles in the hope of finding a new
self that defies the old. The former self is passive, stuck with the woman of the fifties ‘feminine
mystique’ and the whole charade of an angelic order of womanhood. The new self is part of the
spirit of rebellion, a would-be Brando, sick of the inertia of complacent living. Plath is seeking
out new heroes within herself. These become the personae of 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy', and
they will kill the angel in her looking glass. In her place will come a woman with “red hair” who
will “eat men like air”. And what of the men she will devour? These are the protagonists of her
era, those Joe McCarthys and Douglas Macarthurs who represent the old order in which the
machine of war and politics maintain a stasis over existence. These are the cloudy demons
distorted in the glass of her fumbling ego and their own. These are the ‘Herr Gods’ and ‘Herr Lucifers’ that speak to her in the first person pronoun as she does them. They have a charisma to match her “Lady Lazarus” and an entire nation to address in the first person. They occupy the realm of the political and through the political distort both their public and personal selves. They are strong competition to the personae of Plath’s poetry.

The charismatic quality of the personal “I” became part of the redesigning of political and literary personae; part of the need for dramatic relief. It was also a need for experimentalism in terms of the new and emerging media of television. Self-presentation on the screen became more important than off it. It was the new form of self-promotion and required a complete recasting. The political protagonists of the era were compelled to experiment with new ways of presenting the self that would arouse their public. Theirs was the difficult task of creating propinquity with the camera, and, through the lens, with their audience. The old order was forced to face the reality of the new, and thus men such as Eisenhower and Nixon learnt the new process of recreating the self. It didn’t come naturally.

For Plath, recasting her image was part of the acceleration toward the new woman and swift abandonment of the old. Her audience was not to be the readership of McCall’s or Ladies Home Journal, but a much braver species of woman; a woman who could bear the horror of the new unveiling process and not be sickened by the scars of the old. This was the demand of turning over the new. In time, it would lead her from the marquee reserved for the fifties ‘lady’ whose face graced the cover of mainstream society to a bolder, but more marginalised place. There would not be the wide audience she had hoped for; she would not be married to a
particular literary establishment. She would be out in the open without cover, but her voice
would take on the boldness of a new "I" and rip through the dull predictability of the social mask
that threatened to suffocate her.

It was a face-lift and it set her free to confront her personal daemons. It was a liberation
that brought her the power and prestige to raise herself to the level of her personal opponents,
and take a swipe head-on. The strength of the dramatised self would allow her the courage to
exhume the charred bodies of her demons and put to sleep the 'angel' within. Sylvia Plath,
woman of the social order, would be no more. In the mirror, looking back, she greets the face of
the personal self-waiting to be met.