“Brightly Colored Magic and Weird Worlds”:
Sylvia Plath’s Creation of Personae Through Her Visual Poetics

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I extend existing acknowledgments of the impact of Sylvia Plath's visual arts training on her writing in order to argue that her painterly sensibilities are central to her character construction. Specifically, I contend that Plath draws upon a set of visual techniques, which I categorise as hallucinations, mental images, dreams, blurriness, and visual-to-verbal re-inscription. The ability to control subjective experience through the imagination, a philosophy Plath discusses in her journals, acts as a framework for her narratives, and visual techniques become, for Plath's personae, a method of manipulating their experiences through a blurring of the divide between individual imagination and subjective reality. Plath's visual techniques further function to represent her personae's psychic interiority in ways that not only illustrate the limits to expression of the traditionally literary but also offer a means of overcoming these limits through an alternative system of meaning-making. Thus, her personae's agency exists at the level of form, through self-representation that is not stymied by the limitations of the written word, as well as at the level of narrative, through her personae's control of experience. Moreover, because these visual techniques appear frequently in narratives that are preoccupied with a gendered power dynamic, I contend that we should understand Plath's moments of resistance to textual tradition as enabling her personae's escape from patriarchal limitations to freedom and self-expression. While this recognition of the significance of Plath's visual techniques should not necessarily constitute a panacea to the constraints of traditional language, it does offer a new way of reading Plath which acknowledges her painterly sensibilities as crucial to the way in which she gives her personae agency and writes back to her literary forefathers.

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Abbreviations

TBJ *The Bell Jar*

CP *Collected Poems*

J *The Unabridged Journals*

JP *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*

MM "The Magic Mirror"

LH *Letters Home*

Introduction
"Dream Kingdoms": Plath's Control of the I/Eye

In a letter to her mother from March 22, 1958, Sylvia Plath details the discovery of her "deepest source of inspiration, which is art: the art of primitives like Henri Rousseau, Gauguin and Paul Klee and De Chirico" (qtd. in Connors, "Living Color" 107). Implicit in this recognition of visual art as a potent creative stimulus is a resistance to a deferential emulation of the literary intelligentsia of her time, evident in the closing paragraph of her letter:

> If I can write, I don't care what happens. I feel like an idiot who has been obediently digging up pieces of coal in an immense mine, and has just realized that there is no need to do this, but that one can fly all day and all night on great wings in clear blue air through brightly colored magic and weird worlds. (qtd. in Connors, "Living Color" 107)

Kathleen Connors appropriately suggests that Plath's obedience here "may have referred to her tendency to mimic poetic giants to the exclusion of developing her own original style" (107). Indeed Plath's sense of claustrophobia within an established and singular canon is expressly conveyed through the image of the dark, ancient coal mine, juxtaposed with the image of colourful imaginative flight and freedom that a visual stimulus provides. The former is an imaginative trap, while the latter resonates with what Plath in a BBC interview once called her own "visual imagination" (qtd. in Connors, "Living Color" 107). Following M.L. Rosenthal's categorisation of Plath's work as confessional, Plath scholarship has repeatedly flattened the events in her fiction and poetry to mere personal experience, resulting in a failure to recognise her imaginative ability to write beyond herself. Yet if we are to avoid conflating Plath the author and her personae, or characters, we might begin to see the ways in which elements of her character construction have too frequently been dismissed as coincidental autobiographical traits.

In this intervention, I assert that the connection Plath recognises in her letter between visual art, creative freedom, and imaginative control is one that is crucial to the way in which she constructs her personae. Plath's incorporation of her painterly sensibilities, I contend, is not simply an idiosyncratic transference of one passion to another but rather a method enabling her to create characters whose ways of seeing are key to their methods of breaking away from the patriarchal limitations of their worlds. As I aim to elucidate in this dissertation, Plath incorporates a set of visual techniques, which I identify as mental images, hallucinations, dreams, blurriness, and visual-to-verbal re-inscription, into her writing. I argue that these visual techniques are an important feature of her character construction,

offering a mode through which to make sense of personal identity outside of language, spoken or written. When I speak about language here, I am referring specifically to the way Plath represents language within her stories and poems, as opposed to Plath's own use of language. As such, I am not suggesting that Plath herself breaks away from from the linguistic form but rather that she incorporates visual techniques in order to construct characters capable of resisting language, which Plath often codes as masculine, within the diegesis of her poetry and prose. This alternative, visual mode yields the possibility of overcoming the impediments to identity formation associated with the pressures of conformity to the mid-twentieth century mass-marketed image of femininity, shaped and disseminated by a dominant, masculinist discourse and the male figures in Plath's texts.

Central to Plath's character construction is a personal philosophy she defines in a journal entry from July 25, 1952. For the nineteen-year-old Plath, Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz in Act II of Shakespeare's play – "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" – offer an initial spark of illumination (2.2.247-248). Without denying the existence of an objective reality, she nevertheless determines that "No man can ever grasp the whole impersonal neutrality of a universe. That is hidden under the mists of subjectivity" (J 121). Elsewhere in her journal, Plath inveighs against the limitations of the singularity of her existence. "Always I want to be an observer," she writes in one of her most famous diary entries, dated November 13, 1949:

> I want to be free – free to know people and their backgrounds – free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient … I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be – perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I – I am powerful – but to what extent? I am I. (LH 39)

Plath's consistently subjective view – "I am I" – is presented as an obstruction to an attainment of omniscience where her independent sense of self is compromised, "classified and qualified" as she is by external forces. In the July 25, 1952 entry where Plath has established that total objectivity is unachievable, she aligns herself with Hamlet in her recognition of the power of thought to affect reality, asking, "So what is reality? The definition is so arbitrary. It could be the basic truth, the fact of matter, impersonal, neutral. Or it could be, for each individual, what that individual chooses to make of his corner of the world" (J 121). Yet within Plath's flexible definition of "reality" lies an epiphany, which she articulates in a resounding conclusion to her entry: "We all live in our own dream-worlds and

make and re-make our own personal realities with tender and loving care [...] And thus individuals construct absolutely real dream Kingdoms – paradoxically all 'true' although mutually exclusive at the same time" (J 121). Within the limitations of subjectivity, then, Plath identifies a type of freedom; if she "chooses to make" her own "absolutely real dream Kingdom," then, at the expense of godlike omniscience, there is still a godlike agency to be gained in the subjective control of experience (J 158). If being omniscient and breaking away from this subjectivity of existence is impossible, then the next best thing is to govern the self in a world of its own creation.

In Plath's oeuvre, these manipulations of subjective experience appear as part of her personae's negotiation of domestic and familial limitations – that is, Plath writes her personae's agency through an application of the same philosophy she describes in her journals at nineteen. By identifying a set of visual techniques in Plath's work, I argue that she incorporates a personalised method of meaning-making through her knowledge of visual art and preoccupation with processes of visual perception in negotiating the divide between objective truth and subjective reality. In this way, Plath's artistic knowledge functions for her as a method of resisting the obedience to which she refers in her 1958 letter. By examining these visual techniques in Plath's work it becomes clear that, fused with her philosophy, they are vital to the method through which she constructs her personae and reveals their private subversion of the imposing masculine figures and patriarchal constraints of their worlds. This dissertation will examine moments of imaginative resistance to language, coded as masculine in Plath's archive, and the use of visual techniques to disrupt this linguistic power dynamic. Throughout Plath's oeuvre, visual manipulation of subjective reality becomes, as this dissertation will demonstrate, a method of private subversion of the patriarchal figures and forces that attempt to put limits on Plath's speakers and protagonists.

Robert Lowell, in his 1966 foreword to *Ariel*, describes Plath's poems as "personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever" (vii). These feverous visions and hallucinations often appear as belonging to a subject who is battling to self-express (usually linguistically) and who is experiencing a sense of inertia or stagnation, a lack of creativity. Hence, Lowell's observation that these poems are not merely hallucinations but specifically controlled ones is fruitful, because within such an acknowledgment is an appreciation of Plath's speakers' agency. In order to stay alive, to fight against the "vast" and "impersonal" objective world, as the speaker of "Tale of a Tub" (1956) reminds us, "each day demands we create the whole world over, / disguising the constant horror in a coat / of many-colored fictions" (CP 24). As Elisabeth Bronfen suggests, the

speaker of this poem "conceives of the world exclusively as something her perceptions create against the backdrop of the void of the tomb from which the self emerges" (85). "This resurrection," Bronfen continues, "occurs not only in the sense that she can learn to don the guises expected of her but more crucially in the sense that she can convince herself that the existence of the world depends on her perception of it" (85). Bronfen's analysis usefully points to the "resurrection" of the self – a motif in Plath's archive – and notes the involvement of perception in that process of rebirth. I would like to extend Bronfen's acknowledgment to interpret these hallucinatory projections of the psychic state of the speaker as a method of representation that is also a move away from the linguistic to the realm of the visual, allowing the speaker to make sense of herself and her identity outside of language.

For Plath's personae, the ability to keep the imagination alive is portrayed as a matter of life or death. We see this in the case of Agnes Higgins, protagonist of Plath's 1956 short story "The Wishing-Box" whose inability to resist "The utterly self-sufficient, unchanging reality of the *things* surrounding her" drives her to suicide (JP 218). In this story, the force of the imagination appears, yet again, in the power of hallucinatory looking and in Agnes's desire for the concoction of reality and imagination to mould her experience, which she cannot achieve. Instead, in Agnes's powerlessness to creatively manipulate her perception there is a sense of constriction so strong it might efface the self: "She felt choked, smothered by these objects whose bulky pragmatic existence somehow threatened the deepest, most secret roots of her own ephemeral being" (JP 218). For Agnes, recuperation of the self, then, depends on an ability to bleed the real and the imagined. Luke Ferretter argues that "The Wishing Box" constitutes "the first and only time" Plath explores "the relative values of reality and transformation by the creative imagination" in fictional form (*Sylvia Plath's Fiction* 66). Yet, as this dissertation aims to exhibit by revealing a connection between Plath's visual attention and her philosophy around the subjectivity of experience, what Ferretter deems a single exploration is, in fact, a framework that informs her literature long after 1956. Plath's sustained preoccupation with the symbolic eye, the gaze, and processes of visual perception, as well as the recognition of the creative control her visual sensibilities afford throughout her written archive is deliberate and, I will argue, pivotal to the feminist force of her work.

Theoretical Framework and Clarification of Terms

In her 1962 essay "Ocean 1212-W," Plath recounts the memory of a first claustrophobic brush with a singular identity at the time of her brother Warren's birth (1935). The three-year-old Plath, "who for two and a half years had been the center of a tender universe" subsequently becomes aware of her own subjectivity (JP 24). Taking place on the beach of her childhood, Plath's epiphany is an echo of the refrain ("I am I") found elsewhere in her work: "As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the *separateness* of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (JP 24). The young Plath's awakening from what she describes as "fusion" here is reminiscent of Mihàly Csíkszentmihályi's idea of "flow," which he defines in *The Psychology of Optimal Experience* as a state in which "information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, [and] psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no need to worry, no reason to question one's inadequacy. But whenever one does stop to think about oneself, the evidence is encouraging" (39). Flow is a state in which one is so absorbed in an activity that the imaginative borders between the self and the rest of the world, even the sensation of *being* a self, is lost.

According to Csíkszentmihályi, "The loss of the sense of a self separate from the world around it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment" (63). Thus, while Plath's felt "*separateness*" at the end of "Ocean 1212-W" can be interpreted as stemming from an abrupt absence of flow, this absence is contingent less on a changed psychological state and more on an altered environmental state (the birth of her brother). It seems appropriate, then, that in *The Promise of Happiness* Sara Ahmed should challenge Csíkszentmihályi's definition of flow for its psychological as opposed to environmental leanings by posing a crucial question: "What if to flow into the world is not simply understood as a psychological attribute? What if the world "houses" some bodies more than others, such that some bodies do not experience the world as resistant?" (12). As this dissertation will explore, the way in which Plath illustrates her characters' limitations is frequently through the relationship between the body and the environment. A great deal of Plath's poems contain speakers whose agency lies in their ability to manipulate the landscape around them and, as Adrianne Kalfopoulou puts it in her examination of Plath's 1956 "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," "eyes are the conduit through which the wager is conducted" (901). Ahmed's consideration of the limitations the environment imposes upon a subject offers a useful theoretical model with which to explore the questions of narrative agency and self-representation that comprise the focus of this dissertation. As such, through an investigation

of manifestations of flow-like states in Plath's fiction and poetry, I aim to uncover a connection between Plath's philosophy of controlling subjective reality and her personaes' narrative agency through their visual manipulations of their environments. In other words, I contend that Plath's personaes' control over their subjective experience through processes of visual transmutation manifests as an achievement of flow through an alteration of their environment. While these alterations may be temporary or even fantastical, *mise-en-abîme* fictions, they nevertheless offer imaginative possibilities that also critique the imaginative limits of the patriarchal worlds these personae inhabit.

In addition to examining the ways in which Plath's visual techniques allow her personae to visually transform their environments, I also consider their usefulness as a mode of self-representation. In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie argues that "identity is relational," as opposed to existing as a stable, internal core within each person, and by extension "it exists only as narrative" (25). If the formation of identity requires narration, then the way in which a subject's ability to narrate her identity is dependent upon her agency over that narrative – her *power* to represent herself through the means through which she narrates herself. Throughout this dissertation, I draw upon Currie's theories in order to demonstrate how those moments when Plath's characters attempt to make sense of themselves through an alternative mode to the spoken or written word are vital to their agency. I therefore agree with Deborah Nelson, who argues that "[w]ithdrawing from the scrutiny of others to conduct a dialogue with oneself is one of the most powerful images of autonomy that we have, both aesthetically and politically" (25). In this dissertation, I will unpack Nelson's identification of a causal relationship between Plath's personaes' resistance of 1950s surveillance and the limitations it imposes upon their ability to make sense of themselves independently in order to freely self-express. Using Currie's theories, I will demonstrate how Plath's personae resist this surveillance through a private, visual system of meaning, creating a space where self-expression can be handled with more autonomy.

"Ocean 1212-W" deals with many of Plath's recurring thematic preoccupations – "all the traumatic flotsam and jetsam," as Andrea Gerbig and Anja Müller-Wood have called these images of the sea, the dead father, the troubled relationship with her mother, fairytales, and childhood (85). Gerbig and Müller-Wood have argued that this story is specifically preoccupied with "the subject's coming into language" (85). They read the symbol of the baboon, a wooden carving the young Plath discovers, as "not merely an object, but a 'sign' of her ability to connect to the world through language," drawing attention to Plath's diction (the sacred "Sacred Baboon" as a "sign") (Gerbig and Müller-Wood 86)(JP 25). Yet I claim

that this baboon represents an extra-linguistic sign, not evidence of the young Plath's "transformation of childhood jealousy into creativity and communication" in a linguistic sense, as Gerbig and Müller-Wood suggest, but a "blessing" from a maternal source ("The motherly pulse of the sea"), where this sea-mother is responsible for "perceiving" the speaker's sense of isolation (Gerbig and Müller-Wood 86) (JP 25). This exchange is thus characterised by both silence and perception. If "Ocean 1212-W" engages with language, then it does so in order to suggest that this felt separation might be overcome not necessarily through a linguistic mode but rather through an extra-linguistic, reciprocated sympathy between an individual and her environment. I am interested in how Plath's visual techniques enable her personae to privately and silently find a sense of flow in their environments through visual processes, manipulating their vision of this world so as to control their subjective reality, but also locating, in the natural world, a set of signs through which to create a personalised system of meaning-making, away from a dominant linguistic sphere.

This overcoming of a discovered separateness through a return to the mother, the womb of the sea, signals Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection in *Powers of Horror*. Plath's sea in "Ocean 1212-W" resembles Kristeva's description of the "*chora*" – the "receptacle" she associates with infancy and the mother's body, prior to an initiation into language (14). It is through language that, according to Kristeva, the subject takes on borders, capable of defining herself as separate from the things of the world surrounding her. "But from that moment on," Kristeva describes, "while I recognize my image as and change in order to signify, another economy is instituted. The sign represses the *chora* and its eternal return" (14). Subject formation for Kristeva thus involves a movement from this chora into language, but inherent in her theory is an acknowledgement of language's fundamentally constructed, secondary nature. If signification can at first occur, then resignification must also be possible through a return to the pre-symbolic (a movement which is possible in Kristeva's theoretical paradigm). Throughout this dissertation, I draw from these theories in order to demonstrate how Plath's speakers, plunged into a state of abjection where the distinctions between subject and object are no longer clear – a state outside of language – are reborn from this horror through a personalised and controlled rebirth into an alternative, visual language. As such, we can read Plath's literature as illustrative of what Kristeva terms sublimation, where the abject is controlled: "the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control" (11). Additionally, this alternative, self-created system of meaning, like the baboon from "Ocean 1212-W," also enables control over subjective identity formation.

I occasionally refer to Plath's personae as "women" in this dissertation, and I discuss their "feminine" resistance to patriarchal limitations. Recognising that these terms are appropriately highly contested and reductive, I nonetheless find them useful in acknowledging the social and political norms of Plath's era. For this reason, I use them but only in their broadest, intersectional sense. I will use the word "woman" as Judith Butler defines it in *Gender Trouble*, wherein "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (23). As such, when I speak about a "feminine" resistance, I refer to the disruption of a constructed patriarchal discourse that Plath embodies in her writing and thus speak back to the dichotomy I see apparent in Plath's fictional worlds, where her personae encounter patriarchal limitations, whether systemic or in the form of domineering patriarchal figures.

My definition of agency is also built upon Butler's definition thereof. Butler's rejection of a pre-existing internal, coherent identity enables her development of poststructuralist feminist theorists' ideas surrounding phallogocentrism and masculinist language. For Butler, to presume any monolithic enemy or Other distracts from the task of resignification, and it is here that Butler locates the possibility for subverting "the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism," which, she concludes, "seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies" (42). Butler identifies the possibility for the disruption of these illusions of immutable significations. Recognising that "repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural production of identities" it follows, for Butler, that "woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (42-43). In this way Butler links her claims to a variation of Beauvoir's famous declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," and I am interested, in Plath's work, in this process of becoming and how it is linked to agency enhanced through visual techniques (283). In other words, I use Butler's framework to examine Plath's own resignifying methods, where within the construction of her personae is an apparent recognition of the continuous temporal nature of identity formation.

The Plath Field and Existing Acknowledgements of Her Visual Techniques

Plath was undecided for half of her undergraduate degree about whether to specialize in visual art or English Literature, and even after determining she was more skilled in the latter,

continued to produce drawings, collages, and paintings. A few scholars have discussed evidence of a visual thread in Plath's oeuvre and made powerful connections between the motifs and ideas of her visual art and her written work. M.L. Rosenthal contends that "When we use the word 'vision' about her poems, it is in a concrete and not a philosophically general sense," while others, like Jane Hedley and Charles Newman, have identified Plath's use of an imagist technique as functioning in crucial ways (72). Hedley asserts that these imagist poems are powerful for "their refusal of narration, their achievement of a pattern of *un*resolved stresses," and that Plath's placement of "confessionalism and 'well wrought urn' poetics in an oxymoronic relationship with each other" constitutes her "most significant achievement" (Hedley 65, 73). Charles Newman calls them "a breakthrough in modern poetry — perhaps even more importantly, as a break of poetry *from* the modern — for she not only rewedded imagist technique to the narrative line, but demonstrated that our present division of poetry into the 'academic' and 'beat' [...] is historically arbitrary" (49). Such scholars have astutely drawn attention to how Plath's visual artistic education might have informed her written work in ways that have subsequently set her poetry apart. In this dissertation, I develop these existing acknowledgments to consider the significance of Plath's artistic education in terms of her sociopolitical critiques and the construction of her personae.

Leonard Scigaj's 1988 essay "The Sylvia Plath That Nobody Knows" offers a breakthrough, thorough examination of Plath's ekphrastic poetry. By surfacing the ways in which Plath's knowledge of visual art informs the content of her ekphrastic poems, he aptly remarks that the source of Plath's inspiration came through a process of "Assimilating Klee's work in her first mature period, just a year and a half prior to choosing the poems of *The Colossus*," and also defines that imagination as "a source that fuses the subjective needs and longings of humans with the world of everyday occurrences, reconciling their conflicting claims while transmuting them onto a higher plane" (235). Scigaj's tracing of the origins of Plath's visual imagination to her visual artistic knowledge, as well as his recognition of Plath's fusion of the imaginative and the real, the "everyday" and the "subjective needs and longings" he discusses here, is, I would argue, deserving of more attention. As such, it is an idea this dissertation takes up centrally. I agree with Scigaj that Paul Klee's formalism is identifiable in Plath's written work and that "through formal artifice," she "add[s] the illusion of a third dimension by dramatizing the contradictory nature of experience at the same time that these contradictions are reconciled and transmuted into new unities by the imagination" (241). Still, Scigaj's analysis is limited to the ekphrastic poems and thus warrants a wider application. For this reason, I corroborate his understanding of the connections Plath makes

between imagination and the visual artistic philosophies with which she was familiar by investigating the incorporation of Plath's visual sensibilities in poetry beyond the ekphrastic and in her prose as well. I also illustrate how Scigaj's recognition of the imaginative work involved in this process is crucial to the agency of Plath's personae.

Scigaj critiques Judith Kroll's intense study of Plath's oeuvre, *Chapters in a Mythology*, for its overwhelming focus on Giorgio de Chirico as Plath's artistic influence which, according to Scigaj, results in Kroll "dismissing without discussion Plath's seven other early meditations on paintings" and a concealment of "a brighter, more sanguinely optimistic and ebullient poet" (226). I concur with Scigaj that Plath's early poetry, and much of her work before her use of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* as a blueprint for the mythic system Kroll argues she develops, warrants more attention. Many of the visual techniques and methods of self-representation that are apparent in the *Ariel* poems are also evident in the poetry of *The Colossus* and *Crossing the Water*, as this dissertation will reveal. Nevertheless, Judith Kroll's rich study of Plath's oeuvre offers insights that remain significant to this dissertation. Particularly useful is her acknowledgment that the processes of visual perception in Plath's work have direct effects on what she calls Plath's personae's "*state of being*," as opposed to merely a "state of mind" (16). For Kroll, "Her experience, she suggests, *is* things perceived in a subjective or metaphorical way, so much so that the details often have the force of hallucination" (16-17). As I will discuss, Kroll's note has important consequences for the way in which we understand Plath's visual work and its involvement in the construction of her characters.

Many of Plath's drawings and paintings are catalogued in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, edited by Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley, a text that is useful for confirming a relationship between Plath's visual imagination and the way in which visual artistic techniques function in her work. Among the essays in this collection, relevant to this dissertation is Fan Jinghua's "Sylvia Plath's Visual Poetics" for its insightful surfacing of the literary effects of Plath's relationship to visual art. Recognising that "there is a visual art principle working throughout her poetic creation," Jinghua contends that, for Plath, "the ekphrastic principle is an internalized method," with the effect of creating tension, building momentum, and toying with perspective (205, 207). Perhaps most importantly to my argument, he also notes that Plath's use of visual techniques becomes a personalised system of meaning-making, wherein the "self-contained verbal pictures" that comprise Plath's poetry form part of her "discursive language" and are "recognizably idiosyncratic and emblematic" (205). I will be extending Jinghua's astute acknowledgments in order to consider the

significance of this personalised process of meaning-making more broadly, especially in terms of Plath's characters' ability to take control of the means of identity formation.

A more recent collection of essays entitled *Representing Sylvia Plath*, edited by Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, recognises Plath's artistic dynamism and as such takes seriously the work of analysing her literature and its contexts without allowing biography to supersede analysis. In this collection, Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty's essay "Coming to Terms with Colour: Plath's Visual Aesthetic" is particularly pertinent to this dissertation insofar as it draws attention, similarly to Jinghua's essay, to Plath's visual techniques within her writing. Crucially, de Nervaux-Gavoty acknowledges how the neglect of consideration for Plath's artistic knowledge has produced a hole in her scholarship, contending that "Plath's repeated attempts to capture and incorporate into her texts what most eludes writing – its absolute other, one might say – point to crucial dimensions of her aesthetic" (111). With a focus on colour and dimension, de Nervaux-Gavoty makes a start at considering the importance of these visual techniques to self-representation in Plath's work through her argument that "At first submitted to the poet's formal designs, colour gradually asserts itself as an autonomous entity. This shift goes hand in hand with an inscription of psychic pain and the body, both kept out of her early poems" (111). De Nervaux-Gavoty also extends Scigaj's analysis of the ekphrastic poems in a way that closely aligns with my own argument, suggesting that they represent Plath's attempts to reflect on patriarchal literary tradition (117). I will expand de Nervaux-Gavoty's analysis to include more of Plath's archive, acknowledging more diverse ways in which Plath draws upon these visual techniques and the effects they produce. I also take seriously De Nervaux-Gavoty's recognition of the relationship between the visual and the construction of the self when she says "Psychic disturbance is intimately tied to the body here and colour seems to act as a link between them" (121). While de Nervaux-Gavoty focuses on colour here, her idea can enhance a recognition of the impact of other visual techniques in Plath's oeuvre on the way in which we understand Plath's representations of femininity.

Chapter Breakdown

In my first chapter, I examine mental images and hallucinations as methods of engaging processes of perception to trouble the divide between imagination and reality. Here, I argue that these techniques allow Plath's silenced speakers to resist the self-erasure tied to this silencing by representing an externalisation of the speakers' interiority – a form of self-representation through which her speakers are able to independently make sense of their

identities. I am particularly interested, in this chapter, in how Plath associates hallucinations, mental images, and memory, where self-formation hinges on a continual resuscitation of personal history. In my second chapter, I turn to Plath's use of dreams and blurriness, techniques I contend are important not only in illustrating the psychic states of her personae but also in facilitating a manipulation of their relationship to their environments through fused perception and imagination. With particular attention to Plath's nature poems, I examine how this visual fusion with the environment also allows for the creation of a private, visual system of meaning-making through which Plath's personae can make sense of their identities. Finally, my third chapter, I examine Plath's use of the technique of visual-to-verbal re-inscription in order to appropriate and subvert the language and images of a patriarchal culture. I illustrate how Plath locates in visual art a system of overcoming her frustration with the crippling weight of patriarchal literary tradition while also speaking back to her own culture's flattening of femininity to a conformist ideal, and I trace moments in her literature where such a technique informs her character construction. Where at once this patriarchal discourse inscribes the female body, Plath's personae resist this inscription either through subversion, through re-inscription, or through evasion, through transcendental motion.

Chapter One
"Gilding What's Eyesore": Plath's Private, Hallucinatory Worlds

> Such she often felt herself — struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see," and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her.
>
> ——Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

"Hopkins House is ugly," Plath begins in a journal entry from 1950. "It is all awkward corners, all gawky red chimneys, gables, blue tile roofs, red tile roofs worn to purple, and yellow walls with white and blackened green woodwork." Yet her initial contempt for the garish house opposite her own eventually gives way to an inadvertent fondness:

> Yet I love Hopkins House. Such is the resiliency of man that he can become fascinated by ugliness which surrounds him everywhere and wish to transform it by his art into something clinging and haunting in it's [*sic*] lovely desolation. I would paint the geometric shutters patterned against the oblongs of yellow wood, the trapezoids and slouching angles of the roof, the angled jutting of the drain pipes – I would paint in a bleak and geometric tension of color and form – what I see across the street ... the ugliness which by man's sense of wishful thinking becomes a beauty touching us all. (J 35)

Kathleen Connors cites this entry in order to demonstrate Plath's enchantment with "the artist's vision and the transforming power of the human mind" as well as her treatment of the house "as a painting subject" (29). Yet what this musing also demonstrates, and what in my opinion warrants more emphasis, is Plath's framing of these processes as interrelated ones. Apparent here is Plath's appreciation of the artist's ability to manipulate what she visually perceives, painting her vision with the brush of the imagination and producing practical truths about the relationship between herself and her environment. This entry is thus a testimony to more than just the "aesthetic attraction to [...] the less-lovely grotesque that she would continue to explore in her literary *oeuvre*" which Connors pinpoints; it also evidences an affiliation between Plath's painterly sensibilities, her personal philosophy about the ability of the human mind to transfigure what it visually perceives, and the capacity of the individual to regulate her experience of the world through this method (29).

Plath's belief in the ability of the imagination to transform perception becomes, as I will explore, a philosophical foundation for much of her poetry and fiction and a particularly pivotal feature of her character construction. Her personae frequently go "gilding what's eyesore," as the speaker of "Green Rock, Winthrop Bay" (1958) puts it, where what is subjectively perceived is controlled through the visual imagination (CP 105). In this chapter,

I examine hallucinations and mental images in Plath's work, arguing that these visual techniques allow her characters a method of self-representation that is vital to their agency and control over their identity formation. As such, I draw upon Mark Currie's identification of two possibilities for identity formation, founded on the premise that "identity is not inside us" (Currie 25). The first is a relational framework in which "the explanation of a person's identity [...] must refer not to the inner life of the person but to the system of differences through which individuality is constructed" (Currie 25). Alternatively, "identity is not within us because it only exists as narrative," wherein "the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterise us and organise them, according to the formal principles of narrative – to externalise ourselves as if talking of someone else, and for the purposes of self-representation" (Currie 25). It follows that in both cases, then, the formation of identity relies on a negotiation of this "system of differences" where control over the tools of externalisation through narrative is vital. While Currie refers specifically to a literary method of self-narration here, in Plath's fictional worlds, her speakers continually struggle to wield power over language because the spoken and written word are framed as male tools of oppression. As such, Plath's visual techniques allow her speakers a private, unmonitored mode of self-narration away from language.

As this chapter will reveal, hallucinations in Plath's work embody the silenced speaker's creative control of perception through the visual imagination. These hallucinations represent a projection of the interioriority of the speaker onto the exterior environment, allowing for Currie's externalisation of the self and a method of private self-knowledge through which to recuperate an identity that is otherwise effaced. Furthermore, focusing on Plath's 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, I will explore how mental images offer a similarly visual method of self-exploration which is linked to autobiographical memory, crucial to self-knowledge. *The Bell Jar*, set in 1953 New York City, illuminates the plight of the 1950s woman, where, as Pat MacPherson notes, "By the mid-1950s 'the norm,' a single-dimensional conformity based on image, seemed to have achieved the status of official language" (1). Betty Friedan calls this image the "happy housewife heroine" – "the image by which modern American women live," an image "created by women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment, and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis" (21). In order to resist the pressure to conform to an artificial image, Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, must find a space outside of this official language through

which to independently make sense of her own identity, to overcome her sense of aberration which takes a toll on her psyche, and to keep her personal memory intact.

Hallucinations as Self-Representation

Three of Plath's late poem – "Tulips" (1961), "Poppies in July" (1962), and "Poppies in October" (1962) – explore a link between an inability to self-express through language and the erasure of identity. In "Tulips," the speaker, lying in a hospital bed, describes the surrender of her identity: "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions. / I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons" (CP160). This identity erasure, in "Poppies and July," is also apparent in the numb speaker's inability to feel when she addresses the flowers, which she calls "little hell flames," "You flicker. I cannot touch you. / I put my fingers among the flames. Nothing burns" (CP 203). In these poems, silence and identity loss are interwoven. Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty asserts in her analysis of "Poppies in July" that "The recurring image of the wounded mouth indicates her incapacity to articulate her own identity," and indeed, across all three poems, each time the speaker describes the flowers as mouths her agitation is palpable and seemingly tied to an identification with the flowers (124). In "Tulips" the flowers are "Upsetting [...] with their sudden tongues and their color," in "Poppies in October" the "late mouths" threaten to annihilate the speaker, prompting her to ask "Oh my god, what am I," and in "Poppies in July" the speaker's resentment is conspicuous where she says, "it exhausts me to watch you / Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth" (CP 161, 240, 203). The flower mouths move but make no sound, signifying a failure to speak, and the personaes' frustration suggests they share the flowers' affliction. Additionally, in "Tulips," the speaker tells us that the "redness" of the tulips "talks to my wound, it corresponds," confirming that the flowers can be read as representations of herself, and in "Poppies in October" this correspondence is equally apparent in the "skirts" of the poppies and the woman's "red heart" which "blooms" in "Poppies in October" (CP 161, 203).

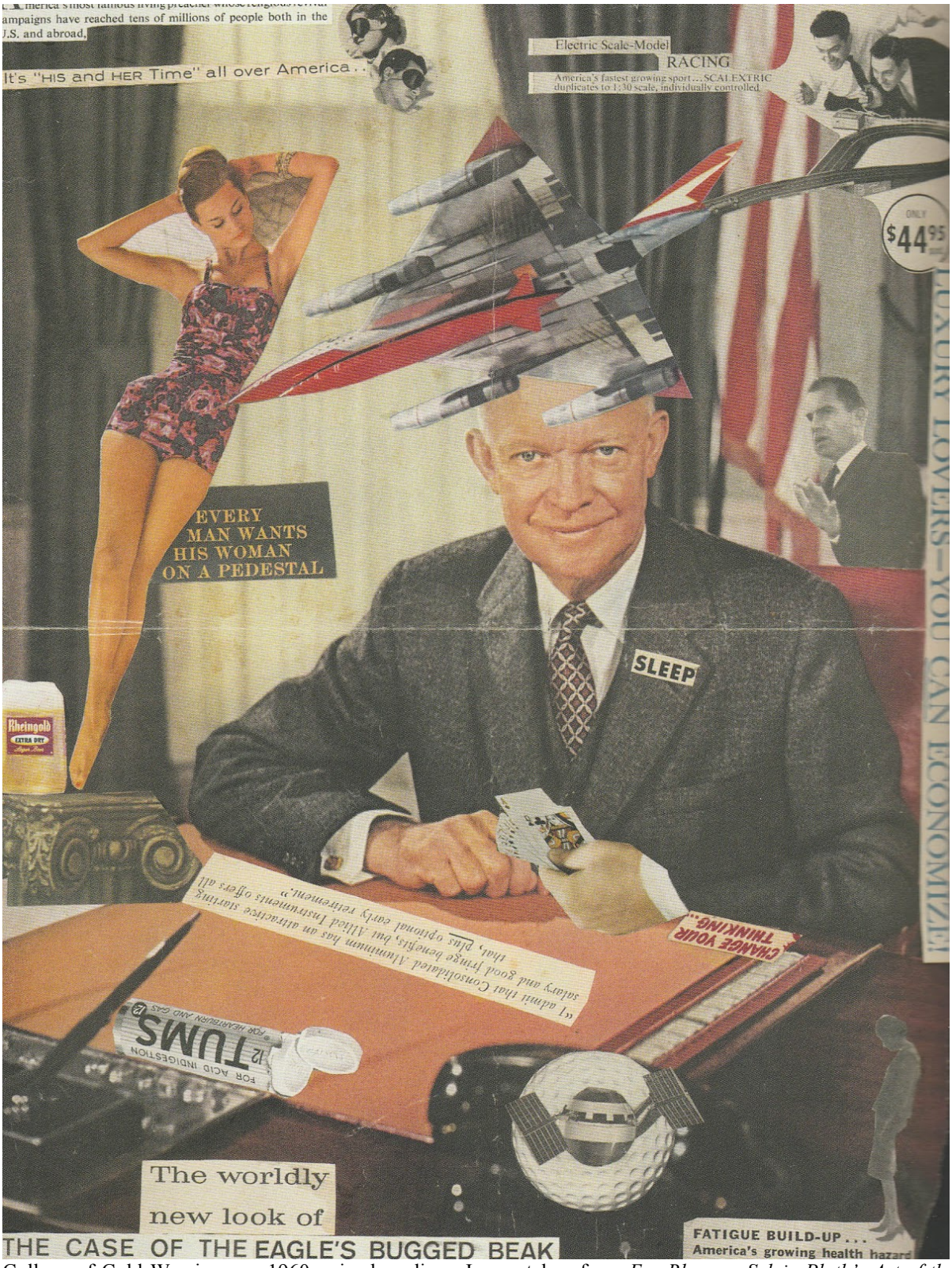
In examining these poems, it is useful to draw upon Christina Britzolakis's argument that there are two kinds of anthropomorphism common in Plath's poetry, "prosopopoeia, the fiction by which an absent or voiceless entity is endowed with face or voice, and apostrophe, the figure of address [...] which purports to vivify inanimate objects" (*Theatre of Mourning* 104). Appropriately, Britzolakis argues that the effect of this anthropomorphism is a congruence "between the inwardness of the subject and the outside world," however she also contends that this congruence "risk[s] the loss of that very autonomy and centrality of poetic

voice which invocation claims. Objects external to the self can then appropriate the subjectivity that ought to pertain to poetic voice, leading to an emptying out of lyric voice, a loss of inwardness, and a subjection of the "I" to the non-human" (*Theatre of Mourning* 104). While in these three poems there is evidently a loss of voice, Britzolakis's argument resists application to this particular set of poems, because, I contend, the prosopopoeic red flowers are not the antecedent of this loss. As Judith Kroll argues in her analysis of "Poppies in October," applicable to all three flower poems, "There is [...] no encounter with an objective reality distinctly different from the speaker's inner reality; no case of an objective reality becoming, in the course of the poem, colored or transformed by an emotional condition" (16). I agree with Kroll here, especially if we consider that the hallucinatory nature of the flowers suggests that they are a visual externalisation of the speakers' own state – visual projections conjured by the speaker and subjectively seen. In "Poppies in July," the speaker talks to the poppies which take on the hallucinatory quality of "little hell flames" – the description itself bringing to mind the flickering, flame-like insubstantiality of a vision (this is *why* she cannot touch them – they are not physically there) (CP 203). Likewise, in "Tulips" the flowers flicker and move – they "breathe" and "seem to float" (CP 161). Fan Jinghua notes too Plath's unusual use of perspective in "Tulips" where the "flowers loom overpoweringly larger in representation and perception than in reality. They appear to be more subjectively represented, like the subjective shot in a film" (219). In short, it is plain that readers have access to the speaker's subjective vision here, rather than an objective realm, as Kroll recognizes in her analysis of "Poppies in October": "In fact, the only 'objective' reference to poppies is in the title; the subjectivity is there from the beginning" (16). If we read the flowers as hallucinations, the speaker's vision of them is also her own projection; they are not already out there in the world, but generated through her own perception. In this way, we can read them as extensions of the speaker herself, rather than external objects with which she finds correspondence.

Moreover, this inability to speak is, in these poems, cast as particularly a feminine crisis through the association between the speaker and the flowers. As de Nervaux-Gavoty suggests, the "association of the poppies with a wounded female body [...] turns the flowers into an emblem of femininity mirroring the speaker's subjection to a wilful embrace of patriarchal order" (123-124). I would add that Plath makes a subtle but meaningful link between this wounded female body and a male world of warfare. While in "Poppies in July," de Nervaux-Gavoty sees this "wilful embrace" in the line "If my mouth could marry a hurt like that," drawing attention to the institution of marriage as representative of this patriarchal

order, we also see this masculine usurping of identity in "Tulips," where the speaker's resignation is specifically from the patriarchal world of nuclear warfare and its "explosions" and in "Poppies in October," with its reference to the lethal "carbon monoxides" of World War II gas chambers (CP 203, 160, 240). Plath certainly recognises an association between the male political world and the pressure of women's conformity, as is clear from a collage she made in 1960, where she has assembled various images from magazines to display a critical vision of Eisenhower-era politics and advertising. Here, she has inserted an advertisement for a toy fighter jet, shot off by two men in suits, positioned so that it seems to be aimed at a woman posing in a swimsuit at left, an ironic indication of the untruthfulness of the caption beside this woman: "Every man wants his woman on a pedestal." Notably, the woman's eyes are closed, and she appears to be sleeping, oblivious to her rapidly approaching demise. The image brings to mind the resignation of the speakers of Plath's poems, where this paradigm demands the renunciation of the self and produces a loss of voice and identity. In these poems, we thus find ourselves in a radically ambiguous half-psychic, half-external hallucinatory realm, Julia Kristeva's abject "edge of non-existence and hallucination" with its threat of annihilation (2). This realm is extra-linguistic, indicative of the speaker's abject position in relation to a world where language can be wielded as a tool for self-narration. Jacqueline Rose also makes this observation, describing abjection for Plath as appearing "at the boundary of language, vanishing point and point of emergence for the subject" (33-34). If the inability to vocally express is captured in the feminization of the flowers and framed in opposition to the male world of warfare, then it becomes clear that this inability to speak is coded as uniquely feminine.

Furthermore, these hallucinations, while indicative of a state of inexpressibility, nevertheless serve the speaker's recuperation of identity. The redness of the flowers in "Tulips," for example, at once disrupts the whiteness of the setting and initiates the recovery of the speaker's sensation, returning the her to a state of discernibility: "Nobody watched me before, now I am watched" (CP 161). The tulips also only appear only two- thirds of the way through the nine-stanza poem, save for the first line, though they saturate the rest of the composition. The late entry of the tulips marks the speaker's return to herself, with the tulips interrupting her passive surrender of identity, and although the speaker casts them as threatening in her description of them, they undeniably return her to feeling and sensation: "they hurt me" (CP 161). In the same vein, as de Nervaux-Gavoty observes, the flowers in "Poppies in October" "bring the subject back to life" (124). This poem, she argues, "stages a



Collage of Cold War images, 1960, mixed medium. Image taken from *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* edited by Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley, figure 37.

transitional moment, the recovered unity of a divided female subject who refers to herself in the third person in the beginning of the poem," evident in the speaker's description of herself in the first stanza as "the woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat

so astoundingly" exchanged for the speaking "I" of the final stanza ("what am I") (de Nervaux-Gavoty 124)(CP 240). Similarly, in "Poppies in July" the flowers transfer their colour to the speaker at the end of the poem in what de Nervaux-Gavoty calls a "synaesthetic equivalent of a voice announcing the emergence of a speaking 'I'": "your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule, / Dulling and stilling // But colorless. Colorless" (de Nervaux-Gavoty 124)(CP 203). While de Nervaux-Gavoty refers to these poems to illustrate Plath's use of colour to represent the psychic state of her speakers, confirming the impact of her painterly sensibilities in the construction of these poems, they also portray her personae as regaining control over their identity formation through processes of perception. Hence, we might expand de Nervaux-Gavoty's analysis to consider these hallucinations acting as a substitute method of expression where language fails, enabling the re-emergence of the self, contrary to the loss of subjectivity Britzolakis describes. In other words, the tulips are not so much appropriating the speaker's subjectivity. Rather, the speaker appropriates *them* in her animation of her perception of them and externalisation of her internal, psychic state. Following this line of reasoning, we should expand Britzolakis's focus on these poems, which is primarily on voice, to include consideration for the importance of sight, visual motifs, and processes of transference and transmutation that allow for the speaker's control of narration. Unable to externalise their identity through speech, and thus surrendering to the effacement of self that is framed as connected to the masculine world of warfare through the surgeons and explosions, these speakers' visions of the flowers act as an extra-linguistic externalisation of the speaker's internal state, through which she stages a return to herself. In this way, we can understand these speakers' subjective visual manipulation of their environment as enabling them a method of making sense of their identity, their incapacity or unwillingness to speak notwithstanding.

The hallucinatory poem "Cut" (1962) similarly explores the wounded female body and blurs the divide between the internal and external world. Here, the speaker cuts her thumb while slicing onions, and a steady "plush" of war images streams from the wound:

> Out of a gap
> A million soldiers run,
> Redcoats, every one.
>
> [...]
>
> Saboteur,
> Kamikaze man,

> The stain on your
> Gauze Ku Klux Klan
> Babushka
> Darkens and tarnishes. (CP 235-236)

As scholars such as Marsha Bryant, Deborah Nelson, and Langdon Hammer have explored, "Cut" blurs the divide between the political and the domestic, bringing images of war into the home (the kitchen). For this reason, Bryant is hesitant about reading "Plath's 'blood jet' metaphor in strictly confessional terms" here, instead arguing that "the vibrant discourse of postwar domesticity proves as pertinent to Plath's stylistic excess as the idea of *l'écriture feminine* in red ink," considering the poem's "domestic delirium" – an imagistic push-pull between masculine historical violence and feminine domesticity (Bryant 230). I concur with Bryant that this poem directly responds to the social and political zeitgeist of the mid-twentieth century and therefore should not be read as purely confessional, but at the same time, it crucially draws attention to the psychic state of the domestic housewife. Hammer acknowledges the importance of the speaker's self-representation in this poem, contending that her "hallucinatory fantasy [...] brings history into the kitchen, where aggression is recognized as a part of the poet's relation to herself" (156). To this reading, I would add that the hallucinations themselves, even more overtly than in the flower poems, come directly from the female body; not only are they synonymous with her own blood, but, if read as hallucinatory, then they are also her own visual projections. Once again, the speaker's self-representation is tied to a visual mode of expression.

As Deborah Nelson has argued, "The address to the thumb also condenses a series of twentieth-century conflicts into one image" (27). In this way, she attests, "by collapsing historical conflicts and positions of aggression and violation, Plath thwarts any comfortable moralizing about violence" (Nelson 27). I would add that this collapsing also allows for a single signifier – the blood – to frame this violence as a symbol embodying masculine violence. In a similar vein, Bryant's analogy between "*l'écriture feminine* in red ink" and the speaker's blood recalls a moment in Plath's short story from the early 1950s entitled "Among the Bumblebees." Here, the young Alice Denway discovers in her father's office a set of paper corrections that remind her of her own blood: "The light of the study lamp circled his head with a crown of brightness, and the vicious little red marks he made on the paper were the color of the blood that oozed out in a thin line the day she cut her finger with the bread knife" (JP 323). Alice's blood and masculine inscription are thus overtly connected in this story, through Alice's comparison here, and the similarity of the kitchen accident producing

feminine blood that is connected to patriarchal figures seems to suggest that we can read "Cut" with similar undertones. Steven Gould Axelrod has also made a connection between Alice's wound and Plath's recurring motif of the lost father, a figure of masculinity who frequently puts in crisis her speakers' identities through his absence, arguing that "the bodily image summons the lost father, himself an amputee, an object of both fear and longing" ("Plath and Torture" 73). If these images are indeed connected, then "Cut" weaves together themes of masculine impact on feminine identity, coded as textual inscription and tied to the brutality of warfare and the crisis of the 1950s housewife who must resist the indoctrination of a culture that denies her reality, that flattens her to what the speaker of "Tulips" calls "a cut-paper shadow" (CP 161). Reading Plath's hallucinatory flower poems and "Cut" as companion pieces, there is a clearly set of external masculine forces that stymie the speaker's self-knowledge. Thus, the speaker's self-expression through images functions in opposition to the language of these patriarchal forces that are also framed as the cause of her private, silenced, and repressed pain.

While in the flower poems, especially "Tulips," this alternative mode of expression allows for identity to be recuperated, in "Cut" this expression reveals a speaker subversive of the happy housewife heroine. Plath's use of hallucinations is thus tied to her illustration of her speakers' subjective points of view, a feature of narrative Currie identifies as an inherently "visual metaphor," given that it denotes the reader's *seeing* as the character sees (26). In other words, Plath illustrates the speaker's state by allowing us as readers to see what she sees, even if what she sees has no physical counterpart, allowing for her speakers to self-represent both privately and without words. According to Currie, twentieth-century literary analysis came to recognise the importance of point of view in generating sympathy for a character, a recognition that narrative has the potential to "manufacture our moral personalities" (26). Plath certainly harnesses this already visual technique and, through the use of hallucinations, firmly positions the speaker's subjective vision as one that is entirely her own, so much so that the world outside her own vision is called into question. For Hammer, "Cut" illustrates how "we carry history as an otherness within us, under pressure, only provisionally sealed," but the unleashed pressure of "Cut" also refers more specifically to the domestic housewife's concealment of what Betty Friedan in calls "the problem that has no name" – the suburban wife's concealed "dissatisfaction" that remains "buried, unspoken" (Hammer 155)(Friedan 5). "Cut" is thus at once a testament to the harmful dangers of repressing this dissatisfaction as well as an overt undoing of the image of Friedan's happy housewife heroine. "The problem that has no name" lurks beneath this image, out of sight,

but in "Cut," Plath acknowledges the flat coherence of the happy housewife image and dismantles it through the speaker's hallucinatory self-representation, where the invisible internal state of the speaker becomes visible through a destruction of the exterior and an externalisation of the interior. In this way, "Cut," like Plath's famous "Lady Lazarus" (1961) with its subversive "strip-tease," responds directly to the patriarchal agenda inherent in this visual culture. As Sally Bayley argues, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" is "the avenging femme fatale of anti-glamour," whose "demands to be 'unpeeled' can also be read as an exhortation of removal from the wrappings of an entire culture, a ritualistic 'unperforming' of the constructs of glamour with all its 'facets' and 'parts'" ("Costume of Femininity" 200-201). In "Cut," as in "Tulips," "Poppies in July," and "Poppies in October," this anti-glamour is configured through the wounded female body who, in spite of her silencing to image, nevertheless succeeds in making sense of her identity through her own, alternative visual method.

Resisting a Visual Culture: Hallucinations and Mental Images in The Bell Jar

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is preoccupied with the impact of language on subjecthood, commencing with its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, taking an internship at a woman's magazine – *Mademoiselle* – with the dream of becoming a poet. Quite early in the novel, the key events through which Esther measures her success reveal her conception of her identity as a writer: "I was college correspondent for the town *Gazette* and editor of the literary magazine and secretary of Honor Board [...] and I had a well-known woman poet and professor on the faculty championing me for graduate school [...] and now I was apprenticed to the best editor on an intellectual fashion magazine" (TBJ 31-32). For these reasons, "Esther is a woman of letters," writes Steven Gould Axelrod, "an Aristotelian being of the world, her identity is bound up with language. Organized as a grammar, her psyche expresses itself as text and as the desire to compose text" (*The Wound* 12). Along with a desire for a mastery over language comes Esther's urgent need to master her own identity, but this task is made difficult because she lives in a world where the ideal female identity is predetermined by a patriarchal mandate. For Nóra Séllei, the opening of the novel constitutes a period in which "the body image is 'written' by various expectations (by fashion, women's magazines, the mother's ideal of the 'pure female body,' and by the projections of the image of the 'intellectual woman'" (130). Marked by a series of crises over how to act and who to become, the novel follows Esther's psychological deterioration as she vainly strives to conform to the marketed image of woman of the 1950s where, as Pat MacPherson argues,

"language is the medium through which the social world shapes and positions her. The voice of *Mlle* speaks her as much as she speaks it" (120).

Esther's story is fraught with moments of textual resistance, and the written word repeatedly fails her. We see this first in her hatred of her physics textbook and chemistry classes, a resistance to "this shrinking everything to letters and numbers" and the "hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas" belonging to Mr. Manzi, her professor (TBJ 34-35). Mr. Manzi's writing returns in Esther's description of the shorthand her mother wants her to learn in order to become a secretary: "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. Besides, those little shorthand symbols in the book my mother showed me seemed just as bad as let *t* equal time and let *s* equal the total distance" (TBJ 76). This resistance starts to become a psychological rejection where, as MacPherson also notes, "as she breaks down, so does her linguistic capacity" (120). This breakdown is apparent in Esther's failure to make sense of *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, where she describes the words of this text as nonsensical "barbs and rams' horns," an image that reappears in her account of her difficulty learning German: "What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam" (TBJ 124, 33). It is worth noting that German is the language of her dead father, who "came from my manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia," and so the father's bestowal of identity upon the daughter is felt through this language (TBJ 33). The interconnectedness of these images through Plath's repetitive descriptions suggests that we might read them more broadly as the language of a patriarchal system to which Esther loses access as she distances herself from this world and comes to recognise her identity as composed through this system of meaning. As Gerbig and Müller-Wood note, "For Esther [...] German is coterminous with violence. It is also depicted as preventing rather than fostering communication," and as such the loss of command over the manufacture of identity is synonymous with her breakdown (82). Caroline Smith has also noted that "To Esther, reading and writing are as essential to her well-being as sleeping and eating, yet she believes that she is continually discouraged from pursuing these activities" (17). More than simply discouraged, though, she importantly begins to lose her grasp on the of language so that when she tries to write, she finds her hand producing only "big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally" (TBJ 130). Esther's deterioration is thus inextricably linked to her loss of control over language. In this way, Plath portrays masculine figures in *The Bell Jar* as monopolising Esther's identity through a linguistic mode.

Esther frequently turns to a visual alternative as a method of privately representing her depression and conceiving of her future outside of language. Eileen Aird has observed that "Plath constantly translates Esther's experience in the narrative present episodes into images of her inner journey" and contends that this imagery enables her to "communicate the inner, subjective world in contrast to the external world which is presented in the narrative present episodes" (94, 97). Aird's recognition of the use of images in *The Bell Jar* is one I would like to expand to argue that, for Esther, these images are a discovered method of self-knowledge. In the face of her rejection from a summer writing course, Esther portrays the disintegration of her summer prospects as "stretch[ing] out before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummeted into the gap" (TBJ 114). Similarly, while at home and sharing a bedroom with her mother during this interminable summer, during which Esther falls into a depression, she constructs a comparable mental image: "I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three … nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth" (TBJ 123). Shortly afterwards comes yet another similar image, in which she again envisions "the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade" (TBJ 128). Still, while these mental images serve, as part of Esther's narration, to represent herself, they do not come with the power to transform her perception of the world. She confesses, "even my eyelids didn't shut out the light. They hung the raw, red screen of their tiny vessels in front of me like a wound" (TBJ 123). Furthermore, the images themselves depict her future as flat and monotonous, a visual portrayal of her *inability* to visualise a future for herself. These moments call to mind Siri Hustvedt's mention of the connection between anticipation of a future and imagination, where "our conscious, autobiographical memories are also always *imaginative*," that "We reshape our pasts in memory, but we also shape our futures in imagination" (327, 428). From a psychological perspective, then, Esther's loss of imagination is also a loss of an ability to make sense of herself and her experiences. Plath's text thus provides a chilling answer to Hustvedt's question, "What does the future mean to the suicidal person?" through a bleak illustration (327).

While Esther seems to have encountered an imaginative, creative block alongside her depression, she nevertheless represents that psychic state in visual terms, and this private and personalised system of meaning becomes a pivotal part of her resistance to the patriarchal

enforcement of her identity. In *The Bell Jar*, there is an emphasis on the importance of witnessing in order to be able to make sense of oneself outside of these social and political spheres. As MacPherson describes, the enforcement of conformity depends on being both silenced and watched, and in the McCarthy era of surveillance in which *The Bell Jar* is set, "Dissent within and about the norm was muted. Those speaking a different language were by definition Alien, subject to surveillance by the national security state" (120). Yet, control through surveillance is also dependent on continual concealment; the housewife must conceal her dissatisfaction just as Esther must conceal her desires to deviate from this culturally constituted norm. At the same time, the state depends on this concealment like the feminine mystique depends on housewives believing other housewives are satisfied with their lives – one must *feel* alienated in order to desire to disguise that alienation. In short, a method of resistance to the state, this mystique, and patriarchal impositions to identity is in the discovery of what is continually concealed.

In *The Bell Jar*, this power dynamic of seeing is one over which Esther attempts to prevail. "I wanted to see as much as I could," she explains, "I liked looking at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it" (TBJ 13). A short while later, when Esther accompanies her medical student boyfriend Buddy Willard to see a woman give birth, one of Buddy's peers, Will, cautions her not to watch — "'You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race'" (TBJ 65). Esther later learns from Buddy that "the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain," a drug that induces a "twilight sleep" (TBJ 65-66). Esther repeatedly reveals her fear of subjection to this state of unawareness — "I thought if you had to have all the pain anyway you might just as well stay awake" (TBJ 67). This "twilight sleep" — a succumbing to the gaslighting forces of her culture — contains the source of Esther's paranoia. At the same time, her psychological deterioration seems to run parallel to a distancing of herself from the compliant subject of surveillance, evidenced in her fear of electroshock therapy: "I didn't see how Doctor Nolan could tell you went to sleep during a shock treatment if she'd never had a shock treatment herself" (TBJ 205).

This witnessing also gives rise to Esther's hallucinations – a series of images linked to Esther's personal history of witnessing the horrors of the world that haunt her continually. This haunting is a visual reckoning imperative to Esther's resistance of the patriarchal limitations to her identity formation, albeit terrifying. The novel opens with a hallucinatory haunting in the floating image of the cadaver she sees with her medical student boyfriend

Buddy Willard, and she notably describes this personal haunting in connection with another cultural haunting, namely, that of the Rosenberg trial:

> I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying the cadaver's head around me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar. (TBJ 1-2)

The Rosenbergs, executed for espionage and alienated subjects in Esther's world of surveillance, are associated in this passage with Esther's hallucination of the cadaver, psychologically haunting Esther and impacting her visual imagination. Similarly, while talking to Jay Cee, the editor of *Mademoiselle*, Esther describes seeing "Mr. Manzi standing on thin air in the back of Jay Cee's head, like something conjured out of a hat, holding his little wooden ball and the test tube that billowed a great cold of yellow smoke the day before Easter vacation and smelt of rotten eggs and made all the girls and Mr. Manzi laugh" (TBJ 38). While the trauma of Esther's experiences apparently haunts her in a hallucinatory form, it also effectively undoes the divide between the personal and the political, highlighting Esther's madness in connection with the limitations of her culture. These moments in *The Bell Jar* are reminiscent of Plath's poem about the cinematic spectacle of war representation, "The Thin People" (1957) containing starving figures who, "On a movie-screen" and "unreal" stick around and "do not obliterate / Themselves as [...] the outline / Of the world comes clear and fills with color" (CP 64-65). There is an invasion of the supposed security of the domestic space, the bedroom more specifically, by these hallucinatory, dreamlike visions of war victims who "persist in the sunlit room: the wall paper / Frieze of cabbage roses and cornflowers pales / Under their thin-lipped smiles" (CP 64-65). There is also Plath's short story "The Shadow" (1959) in which young Sadie Shafer goes to see a war movie against her mother's wishes "by the simple device of going to Betty Sullivan's birthday party" (JP 152). The innocent world of the little girl is corrupted when the terror of the film haunts her dreams: "Night after night, as if my shut eyelids were a private movie screen, I saw the same scene come back, poisonous, sulphur-colored: the starving men in their cells" (JP 152). Like Esther, Sadie is fearful of what she sees, but she will not relinquish the chance to be able to know the realities of the world through what she witnesses, will not surrender that agency of knowing herself and her world fully. She worries that, should her mother discover her bad dreams, "it would be the end of any movies, comic books, or radio programs that departed

from the sugary fables of the Singing Lady, and such a sacrifice I was not prepared to make" (JP 152). In all these instances, there is the cognizance of haunting as a necessary precursor to the relinquishing of the false security of childhood and the total separation from the rest of the world and its politics of the domestic space. Additionally, hallucinatory images externalise Esther's otherwise invisible state of paranoia, thus embodying a visual method of self-representation.

Hallucinations can thus be understood as Esther discovery of a private way of keeping alive what she has seen while also concealing it. This visual memory is crucial in enabling her to make sense of herself in a world that attempts to deny her that agency, as is clear at the end of *The Bell Jar*. Aird suggests that these images, representative of Esther's "subjective world in contrast to the external world," begin to fade as Esther embarks on the road to recovery, wherein "the objective world of health begins to replace the world of the bell jar," thus framing Esther's recovery as a process of assimilation, during which she denies herself her creative imagination because "recovery for Esther Greenwood lies in the ability to replace the old imaginative activity with a rational and common sense attitude which denies the artist's insight into a world beyond the world" (96, 97). As Esther discovers, the electroshock therapy shoots her right back into this state of "twilight sleep" where, in her return to "normalcy," she no longer resists and the bell jar is lifted. I would argue, though, that the lifting of the bell jar and Esther's ostensible sanity might only be temporary. While Aird's assertion that Esther's artistic imagination evidences her denial of assimilation, a final surge of images at the end of the novel poses the possibility that Esther's visual imagination is only temporarily suppressed:

> A bad dream.
>
> To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.
>
> A bad dream.
>
> I remembered everything.
>
> I remembered the cadavers and Doreen the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull.
>
> Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them.

> But they were part of me. They were my landscape. (TBJ 237)

Just as for Sadie in "The Shadow," these visions comprise her "waking landscape," Esther's landscape is at once a place of haunting as much as it is her resistance to her mother's attempt to fictionalise, and therefore distort, the narrative of her subjective experience. There is power in breaking out of the confines of what a little girl in Sadie's case, or even a college girl in Esther's case, is supposed to see and know, according to the male-dominated order. As Sadie realises, "Clearly, in spite of my assiduous study of the world, there was something I had not been told; some piece to the puzzle I did not have in hand" (JP 153). Through memory, specifically remembered images and visual recollections, Plath frames this reticent desire to cling to subjective experience, whether through hallucinations or a set of mental images that stand in for memory, as a method of making sense of the self where the state and its culture otherwise corrupt this ability.

Chapter Two

Painting the Roses Red: Blurriness and Dreams in Plath's Short Stories

No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, plank of books,
photographs of dead heroines.
Without contemplating last and late
the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language.
——Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*

In her journal, 24-year-old Sylvia Plath calls "the death of the imagination" her greatest fear (J 210). Here, she discusses the importance of a visual imagination's capacity to transform experience, making particular mention of dreams and hallucinations as involved in this subjective transformation:

> When the sky outside is merely pink, and the rooftops merely black: that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the worthless truth, about the world. It is that synthesizing spirit, that "shaping" force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire. If I sit still and don't do anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine: it is that kind of madness which is worst: the kind with fancies and hallucinations would be a bosch-ish relief. (J 210)

Plath's description of hallucinations as "bosch-ish," referring to the outlandish and disquieting paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, serves to confirm the link I made in my previous chapter between her painterly eye and the visual techniques she employs in her writing. So far I have examined hallucinations as visual methods of self-representation, but I am equally interested in the apparent connection Plath makes here between hallucinations, dreams, and a "synthesizing spirit" through which to resist the "worthless truth" of the "photographic mind." What Plath exhibits in this entry, and what I understand to be an underlying feature of her visual techniques, is a belief in the power to control experience through an alchemical combination of perception and imagination. Plath's fiction and poetry represent imagination as having the ability to control subjective reality through perception, thus allowing her characters to transform their relationship to their environments. In "Mad Girl's Love Song" (1953), in the lines "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead / I lift my lids and all is born again," we see Plath's journal philosophy at work, with the poem's speaker the center of her universe so that by closing her eyes she snuffs out her whole world (qtd. in Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations* 165). This image recurs in "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" (1956), where the

speaker declares, "When my eyes shut / These dreaming houses all snuff out;" and the inhabitants of the street along which she walks – the "puppet-people" in the world she puppeteers – remain "unaware how they dwindle [...] / Nor guess that if I choose to blink / They die" (CP 37). In both these poems, what the speaker perceives constitutes her reality. She discovers, through this epiphany, the power to create and destroy simply by opening and closing her eyes.

As I aim to demonstrate in this chapter, visual perception is central to manipulating a relationship to the environment in a way that is crucial to the control of identity formation. Just as mental images and hallucinations establish a private, feminine system of meaning through which to make sense of the self where a relationship to language is compromised, the vibrancy of the dreamlife, for Plath, serves as an indication of the survival of the visual imagination and the legitimization of the personalised way of seeing it produces. By rejecting the male censure of the feminine imagination, Plath illustrates her personae's subjective view of the world similarly to Virginia Woolf, as Luke Ferretter has observed, involving "the understated juxtaposition of expert male views with a feminist subversion of them" (*Sylvia Plath's Fiction* 20-21). Through the device of dreams, she also reveals her personae's ambivalent relationship to reality transforming them into ethereal inhabitants of the space between the objective world and imagination. While dreams represent the endurance of the feminist view Ferretter identifies, Plath constructs her own Woolfian juxtaposition through a visual method where the male world is represented as hard edged and artificial, while the feminine world of her personae is visually blurred. Like the repressed psyche of the speaker of "Cut," whose blood jet of mental images forcefully spills out into the world and undoes the constructed divide between the masculine world of politics and the feminine world of domesticity, this blurriness threatens the superiority of the male discursive order and allows for a private disintegration of its power. Further, in her poetry Plath exhibits a treatment of nature as a meaningful space through which to realize an alternative, visual system of meaning and transcend the linguistic and voyeuristic limitations of a male-dominated culture. Natural settings combine with visual technique of blurriness, emerging as part of Plath's personae's self-representation, blurring the boundary between the body and its environment, the perceiver and the perceived, and negotiating what Sara Ahmed calls "the drama of contingency" or "the unfolding of bodies into worlds" (22). Overall, Plath's visual techniques of dreams and blurriness are pivotal to her personae's overcoming of the patriarchal limitations that seek to silence their voices, block their imaginations, and render them alienated from their environments. Along with the visual imagination comes a new language

of feminine experience, opposing the limits to linguistic expression inherent in the mandate of the patriarchal figures and forces in Plath's texts.

For Plath's personae, negotiating their environments through dreams and blurriness threatens a disintegration of the self, but it also means casting doubt on the authority of the patriarchal figures in her texts through a recognition of their power as constructed. Thus, the natural world stands in opposition to this construction as a destabilising no-man's land where trees represent the mind, boundaries uncannily fade, and Plath's personae perform what Ahmed calls "a critique of the concept of adjustment; how happiness demands adjusting your body to a world that has already taken shape" (79). Similarly, dreams exhibit a refusal to meet this adjustment, embodying what Siri Hustvedt dubs "the motion of the imagination": "I'll move away in my mind, become someone else, enter another story" (122). Both dreams and blurriness, then, indicate the crisis of identity and location of Julia Kristeva's state of abjection – "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" – where the dissolving limits of the body signal the abject "breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away" (2, 4). Still, for Kristeva, the horror of abjection can be controlled through sublimation or "the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal" (11). As I will demonstrate, Plath's dreamscapes and natural landscapes are sublime in the Kristevan sense – a return from the abject pre-lingual state of identity crisis, where her use of visual techniques enables her to take on "the aesthetic task" of what Kristeva sees as literature's potential to "involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject" (18, 208). In other words, Plath's poetry and prose set in the blurred and dreamlike terrain of the psyche aesthetically capture abjection through sublimation by representing visually what goes unrepresentable in the ordering language of the male world.

The Private Resistance of Dreams

As becomes clear in Plath's short stories collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, her personae, for the sake of survival in the face of patriarchal forces, must learn to recuperate or maintain the imaginativeness of childhood without undoing a loss of innocence. Some are more successful than others, but in all cases, the visual imagination is coded as a vital method of resistance. Plath's 1956 short story "The Wishing Box" foregrounds the importance of maintaining a visual imagination in order to resist the erasure of patriarchal forces through the inability to dream. Its protagonist, Agnes, envies her husband Harold's ability to dream, "appalled" by her own dreams which are "so prosaic, so tedious, in comparison with the royal baroque splendor of Harold's" (JP 214-215). Significantly, the

inability to dream, for Agnes, is framed as part of her sense of alienation from the patriarchal pressures of her world, tied to the written word. At first, when Agnes reads, "her mind" is "full of pictures," and this imaginative process is described as creating for her "a protecting world," but gradually, as in the case of Esther in *The Bell Jar*, this ability to transform words into mental images deteriorates, and the words on pages begin "writhing like malevolent little black snakes across the page in a kind of hissing, untranslatable jargon" (CP 217-218). In particular, Agnes laments the loss of her visual imagination and the ability it provides her to control her reality through an altered perception of her environment: "If, Agnes mourned, in some sweet hallucination an octopus came slithering towards her across the floor, paisley-patterned in purple and orange, she would bless it" (JP 218). Meanwhile, Harold dreams specifically of male authors — William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers, and Robert Frost — and of a red fox that appears "to present Harold with a bottle of permanent black Quink" (JP 215). The story recalls Plath's husband Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox," in which a fox offers poetic inspiration. Clearly there is a battle for creative control through language embedded in the idea of the dream. Not only is Harold a master of the domain of the imagination, he is also a master of the written word, and during the course of the story, Agnes loses control over both of these methods of meaning-making.

While Agnes's story ends tragically with Harold's discovery of his wife lying on the living room sofa with "eyes shut, an empty pillbox and an overturned water tumbler on the rug at her side," elsewhere in Plath's work access to the dreamscape provides a pivotal, private imaginative method of making sense of the self, evading this identity erasure (JP 220). In an earlier story, "Sunday at the Mintons'" (1952), protagonist Elizabeth's ability to daydream is tied to her sustained resistance of her brother Henry's control. Elizabeth, in order to retain her sense of self, turns to the private, unspoken, invisible world of her imagination, a world which cannot be seen and mapped by her pedantic brother, where she manages "to escape Henry's censure unobtrusively by drifting off into a private world of her own, dreaming, musing on anything that chanced into her thoughts" (JP 310). She fantasises about "a time [...] she would confront Henry and say something to him" (JP 311). With this vision of her confrontation comes another of "Henry faltering, wavering helplessly, without words," and so it becomes evident that Elizabeth's ability to express is bound up in a power dynamic with Henry, where her ability to assert her power is subsumed by Henry's more powerful voice (JP 312). Henry's self-expression is thus ensured, while Elizabeth's is continually compromised. Nevertheless, Elizabeth's uncompromised ability to dream enables her to privately reject Henry's control of her identity. Judith Kroll notes that Carl Jung, with whom

Plath was well acquainted, in responding to Robert Graves's myth set out in *The White Goddess*, discusses the "relationship of the (male) poet to his Muse, incarnate (or, speaking psychologically, projected onto) a woman who is a threat to domesticity" in "the psychological relationship of marriage" (Kroll 80). In Jung's paradigm, "Because the Muse does not willingly remain captive, the power of inspiration will desert the wife who has turned domestic" (Kroll 80). We might attribute Agnes's loss of imagination, then, to her ardent desire to continue to remain deferential to her husband in order to fulfill her role as a housewife. At no point in "The Wishing Box" does she appear impertinent to Harold, whereas Henry's continual failure to fully gain control over his sister's identity is evident through his unending flow of admonishments. Elizabeth thus embodies what Sara Ahmed would call a "killjoy," someone who "'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (64-65). What Elizabeth has, and what Agnes lacks, is an embrace with an alternative system of meaning through a visual imagination as well as a resistance to the patriarchal forces that attempt to circumscribe the mid-twentieth century housewife's identity. For Agnes, what goes unseen is malignant and disruptive, while for Elizabeth, the private world of the imagination offers a method of temporary escape from her brother's system of control. In both cases, though, dreams code as a feminine, visual space away from language.

Plath's short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible Dreams" (1958) further confirms the subversive potential of the dreamscape to allow for independent identity formation. The narrator of this story describes herself as a collector of other people's dreams, "a dream connoisseur," working in a dream clinic (JP 156-157). Douglas Hill reads this story as one which "exposes the world as a refraction of consciousness, consciousness as a version of the world. Into this split – other/self, real/surreal, phenomenal/intuitive – her imagination dives, her dream descends" and describes it as containing "flashes of intense vision" (62). This unreliable and uncanny narration suggests that universe of dreams, governed by Johnny Panic, god of the paranoid, might itself be a figment of speaker's imagination. As such, we inhabit her fantasy world, a surreal landscape featuring the narrator's own dream:

> At the bottom of the lake — so deep I can only guess at the dark masses moving and heaving — are the real dragons. The ones that were around before men started living in caves and cooking meat over fires and figuring out the wheel and the alphabet. Enormous isn't the word for them; they've got more wrinkles than Johnny Panic himself. Dream about these long enough and your feet and hands shrivel away when you look at them too closely. [...] No place for you but a room padded soft as the first room you knew of, where you can

> dream and float, float and dream, till at last you actually are back among those great originals and there's no point in any dreams at all (JP 158).

This dreamscape takes us into Kristeva's state of abjection; set in the pre-lingual era of the baby's room ("the first room you knew of"), a time prior to the "alphabet" and language, this is the primordial soup of Kristeva's semiotic, "not that of *linguistic* signs nor of the *symbolic* order they found," the realm of "maternal authority" prior to the "mapping" of the "legal, phallic, linguistic symbolic establishment" (72). The shrivelling of the feet and hands indicates an as yet untraceable distinction between subject and object. "You won't find it written up in any casebook," the narrator tells her reader, placing her dream firmly outside of the textual domain (JP 159). As the story traces the narrator's secret attempts to accrue knowledge of other people's dreams, it becomes clear that, like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, she must remain cognizant of the panic she can trace in dreams in order to resist the brainwashing of the male figures in the text – the Clinic Director who takes her for electroshock therapy and places "the wafer of forgetfulness" on her tongue, the "psyche-doctors" who threaten to "win Johnny Panic's converts," and the "bush-bearded dream collectors who preceded me in history" (JP 171, 165). By remaining skeptical of "the crass fate these doctors call health and happiness" through an allegiance to what she witnesses in dreams, the speaker retains her independence (JP 166). Thus, in this story, as in "The Wishing Box" and "Sunday at the Mintons'," the dreamscape represents an extra-linguistic and private visual world where the protagonist's ability to navigate her sense of self obstructs attempts of the male figures to fully control her identity.

"Blur the Intransigent Lines": Impressionistic Vision as Subversion

In a high school essay on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sylvia Plath grapples with her first encounter with Virginia Woolf's writing, enraptured by the way in which Woolf's "fuzzy rambling sentences" and "blurred impressions" capture the movement of the mind and allow her reader to "jump about from one person's disconnected train of thought to another's" (qtd. in "Living Color" 52). "Imagine that you could peer into the brain of any passer-by at will," the young Plath muses, "Would the thoughts be arranged in grammatical sentences, paragraphed with careful regard as a subject? Far from it. Our thoughts are inconstant and always changing — a kaleidoscopic shifting of images, recollections and impressions. So it is in Mrs. Dalloway" (qtd. in "Living Color" 52). A few years later, Elizabeth Minton would echo this desire in "Sunday at the Mintons'," "wanting to lift up the tops of people's heads like teapot lids and peer inside to find out what they were thinking" (JP 314). In this story, Elizabeth's private

thoughts about her fastidious brother Henry and her daydreams about escaping her domestic constraints come to us in a Woolfian style, with Elizabeth describing what she imagines to be the interior of her own mind as a dark room with "pictures coming and going on the misty walls, soft and blurred like Impressionist paintings" (JP 314). Elizabeth's visual perception emulates the Impressionistic blurriness of her mind, and she finds a particular pleasure in looking out the windows at "the blurred horizon line" at the meeting of sea and sky, where "the water might be thinning into air or the air thickening, settling, becoming water" (JP 310, 308). Her world is "a twilight world" of floating moons and "quivering" light: "forms wavered and blended with one another" (JP 314). Elizabeth's blurry, impressionistic vision of the world around her is set in contrast to the bold, crisp clarity of Henry's. Her brother, who chastises his sister for her daydreaming at the expense of her domestic duties, has a mind she envisions as "flat and level, laid out with measured instruments in the broad, even sunlight," with "substantial buildings with clocks on them, everywhere perfectly in time, perfectly synchronized" (JP 314-315).

A recurring feature of Elizabeth's private daydreams is a resistance to the maps in Henry's study that he adores, a form of textual inscription that, similarly to Mr. Manzi's chemistry formulas in *The Bell Jar*, render a shrinking of the world to a set of symbols that Elizabeth rejects. Thinking of Henry's study, "in her mind's eye" Elizabeth envisions "the black contour lines painstakingly drawn and the faint blue wash of color about the shore of the continents" and "symbols" such as "Stylized clumps of grass to indicate the swamps and green patches for the parks" (JP 312). This reduction translates to Elizabeth's diminished sense of self, a world where "She imagined herself wandering, small and diminutive, up the finely drawn contour lines and down again, wading through the shallow blue ovals of lakes and shouldering her way among stiff symmetrical clumps of swamp grass" (JP 312). Meanwhile, Henry's characterization positions his self-assuredness and dominance within this textual mode. Elizabeth's vision of herself stands in contrast to that of Henry in the centre of the map, "Feet planted firmly he stood with pencil and paper making calculations, checking to see that the world revolved on schedule," where "At night he would watch the constellations go ticking by like luminous clocks, and he would call them cheerily by name, as if greeting punctual relatives" (JP 313). Henry easily makes sense of himself in this domain, while simultaneously threatening to reduce Elizabeth to little more than a symbol and silence her in his system of meaning.

The tension explicit here between Elizabeth's blurry world and Henry's rigid, geometric one also appears in one of Plath's tempera paintings likely dating from a year or

two before she completed "Sunday at the Mintons'." The nine women in the painting are trapped in a flat, cubist dimension, their forms merging with their architectural surroundings. As Kathleen Connors describes, they are "enclosed in static, tight-spaced boxes that prevent them from breaking out, highlighting their unseeing eyes and sexual function. They have no mouths to speak, leaving the viewer with the senses of gaze and touch only" ("Living Color" 33). Their faces appear like masks, with their empty eyes and minimal, vacant features, their dissatisfaction with their entrapment made plain. Yet the figures themselves remain discernible because Plath's linework deviates from the rigidity of cubism in order to depict the figures, offering contrasting, delicate curves that gesture at a strand of hair, an eyebrow, a cheek, a lip, a breast. This linework likens them to Elizabeth Minton in a moment where she appears to Henry where the narrative is fleetingly focalised through him, with "her lavender skirt balancing and swaying around her shins with an alarming hint of impertinence" (JP 309).

Nine female figures, *c.* 1950 - 1951, tempera. Image taken from *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* edited by Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley, figure 33.

This visual image of a clear-cut, imposing world of male authority recurs across Plath's oeuvre. In 1951, when Plath was nineteen, she wrote an essay on Amy Lowell in which, as Connors describes, she "touched upon her own fearful vision of women trapped in

a cruel world designed by men," contrasting "the sensuous images of the woman's skin with the 'artificial stiffness' of her gown before stating her rebellion against the 'manmade' patterns such as a third world war" ("Living Color" 73). A year later, when Plath composed her recently published short story "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" (1952), she seems to have recuperated this imagery to describe the wheels of the train taking its protagonist on a journey to the underworld, which "clocked away like the cogs of a gigantic clock" (*Mary Ventura* 15). When Mary remarks on the strange names of the train stations, a series of numbered kingdoms, her fellow passenger tells her, "'You get used to it after a while [...] And to all the absurd little divisions and subdivisions and classifications. Arbitrary, that's what it is. Arbitrary. But nobody seems to realize that nowadays. One little motion, one positive gesture, and the whole structure would collapse, fall quite apart" (*Mary Ventura* 21-22). The story seems to suggest that against this male world of names and classifications there exists the possibility of breaking free if only one can recognise this world as an elaborate construct. When Mary discovers this artificiality, finally regretting her decision to board the train, the woman beside her explains that she cannot escape: "'You accepted and did not rebel'" (*Mary Ventura* 31). The didactic takeaway of this story is thus an incitement to flee the metaphorical train. Once again, the male world of precision must be eschewed through feminine rebellion.

For Elizabeth, daydreams are her method of escape to a private, feminine world through which to make sense of herself independently of Henry. On a beach walk towards the end of "Sunday at the Mintons'," in a daydream, Elizabeth drops her amethyst brooch, a gift from her mother, into the sea. Especially if we take into consideration Plath's emulation of Woolf's impressionistic representation of the psyche, Luke Ferretter's suggestion that "With the device of the lost brooch, Plath situates her story within the tradition of feminist fiction that she found in *To the Lighthouse*" is particularly apt considering the feminist nature of Plath's story ("The Influence of Somebody" 113). While Elizabeth feels the impact of Henry's control of her identity in language, whether spoken or textual, her maternal inheritance permeates the story in opposition to Henry's linguistic imposition through the visual technique of blurriness. Elizabeth sets about preparing the Sunday meal at the start of the story, where "In the dimness of the austere dining room she moved, a soft violet figure in the half-light of the drawn portieres," a description followed swiftly by a reminder of her maternal identity – "It was thus that her mother had moved years ago . . ." (JP 309). Here, the maternal presence is palpable through a visual connection; both women blurry figures in motion, confined to the domestic space, where the colour of Elizabeth's dress links this

image to the mother's gift of the amethyst brooch (also violet in colour). Later, when Elizabeth loses her brooch, her desire to see Henry wordless is temporarily fulfilled in a daydream. While he stands on a rock, clasping her rescued brooch triumphantly, "a colossus astride the roaring sea," a wave crashes over him and causes him to drown (JP 317). Elizabeth peacefully looks on as, "faltering, fumbling, without words, he toppled back into the depths of the next black wave" (JP 317). With the mother's brooch framed as the catalyst for Henry's demise, and Elizabeth's daydreams and blurry nature thus cast as feminine, it becomes clear that this moment in Plath's story embodies what Kroll identifies as "the killing of the male god (reidentified as a devil or oppressor, whose death, or absence converted into death, is no longer mourned but celebrated) and the associated rebirth of the goddess," motifs Plath would have plucked from Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (Kroll 51). Evidently, Elizabeth's private daydream acts out Graves's killing through a private, feminine fantasy, but it is noteworthy that she not only kills him but also strips him of his ability to speak. At least in this story, the self is reborn only by triumphing over Henry's imposition to her identity by seizing from him the means of that imposition and subverting his linguistic command.

Still, the daydream is only temporary, and in this story, it is not Elizabeth's only means of escape. As Linda W. Wagner observes, "Elizabeth's real subversion is much more private — a condition of a semi-fantastic treatment of 'reality'" ("Specialness" 7). This private subversion, I contend, is enacted through the blurriness of her vision — an affirmative answer to the speaker of "Tale of a Tub" who asks, "can our dreams / ever blur the intransigent lines which draw / the shape that shuts us in?" (CP 25). When in "The Wishing Box" Agnes tries to conjure hallucinations, she does so in an attempt to "prove that her shaping imaginative powers were not irretrievably lost; that her eye was not merely an open camera lens which recorded surrounding phenomena and left it at that" (JP 218). The camera metaphor here functions to represent cold, hard reality just as the utter neutrality of "The photographic chamber of the eye," of Plath's "Tale of a Tub" must be resisted (CP 24). This metaphor embodies Roland Barthes's recognition in *Camera Lucida* that "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). The photograph distorts in its failure to capture subjective experience. Further, Barthes understands the violence of a photograph to be in that "*it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed," an idea concurrent with Esther Greenwood's shut eyes and "their tiny vessels," which she is forced to stare at in spite of her desire to shut out the light of the world (Barthes 91)(TBJ 123). The photograph's "accuracy," to borrow Plath's words in "Tale of a Tub,"

never quite gets at the what is subjectively perceived through combined vision and imagination (CP 25). If one is unable to resist this accuracy, as the speaker of "Tale of a Tub" warns, "such poverty assaults the ego" — identity is jeopardized (CP 24). For Elizabeth, however, this accuracy, cleaved in this story to Henry's austerity, can be overcome through a blurry treatment of her visual perception where, unlike in Barthes's photograph, refusal and transformation are possible. Initially, Elizabeth compares her vision of her brother to his maps, describing his eyes as "very cold and very blue, rather like the waters of the Atlantic on the encyclopaedia map" with "Fine black lines" and a "short black fringe of lashes drawn suddenly distinct and clear" (JP 313). Yet she relishes blurring her brother's distinct features, finding "an odd pleasure in observing him without her glasses. He was invariably so clear, so precise, and now, for once he was quite thoroughly obscured" (JP 309). Through this process, Elizabeth succeeds not only in manipulating her environment but also in privately controlling her perception of Henry and his identity, echoing a moment in "The Wishing Box," when Agnes greets her husband upon his return from work and after drinking sherry discovers, "with a certain malicious satisfaction, that his face blurred before her gaze, so she could change his features at will" (JP 219).

By casting blurriness as a private, feminine method of regaining imaginative vitality and control, Plath writes back to Mr. Ramsay, who, in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, chastises his daughter for her inability to read maps and thinks, "women are always like that; the vagueness of their minds is hopeless" (Woolf 226). Plath uses her visual sensibilities to cast the constructed, masculine authority as one that delineates, circumscribes, and locks the woman in place, showing Woolf's Mr. Ramsay that this "vagueness" can, in fact, be hopeful. Plath challenges this authority like Luce Irigaray: "You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out. What is your fear? That you might lose your property. [...] You close me up in house and family. Final, fixed walls" (25). To resist this world, Plath shows us, her personae must be like the speaker of her poem "Purdah" (1962), whose "eye / Veil is // A concatenation of rainbows" and a "Sheath of impossibles" (CP 243). Plath's "Sunday at the Mintons'" thus typifies Sara Ahmed's assertion that "We might need to rewrite happiness by considering how it feels to be stressed by the very forms of life that enable some bodies to flow into space" (12). Where for Henry this flow, in Ahmed's sense of the word, is readily attainable, Elizabeth must use her powers of perception to harness the ability to transmute reality, to regulate her experience by harnessing creative control where, as Ahmed argues, "bodies do not arrive in neutral" and "what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation" (40). As such, for Ahmed, "To receive an

impression is to make an impression," and it is through this method that Plath's personae might overcome this absence of flow (40).

"Fumy, Spiritous Mists": Blurriness in Plath's Nature Poems

At the end of "Sunday at the Mintons'," Elizabeth daydreams her escape from Henry where the wind lifts her petticoats and she floats away into the sky, Henry drowning in the sea below her. Here, she is described as "floating like a pale lavender milkweed seed along the wind" with "her lavender dress blending with the purple of the distant clouds," a moment of blurry fusion with the natural landscape foreshadowed earlier in the story when she imagines the interior of her mind where "the pink of the ladies' flesh would be the pink of the roses, and the lavender of the dresses would mingle with the lilacs" (JP 318). The image of Elizabeth as a milkweed seed here brings to mind Plath's poem "The Bee Meeting," where the speaker wishes to become "milkweed silk" and "cow parsley," as well as the famous speakers of Plath's late poems, the "White / Godiva" of "Ariel" who "unpeel[s]" and "Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas," and the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" who "melts to a shriek" (JP 246). These are moments that embody what Scott Knickerbocker calls one of Plath's "romantic tendences" categorised by a "desire for transcendence in and through nature" (5). As I will now reveal, these "romantic tendencies" inform Plath's character construction.

In Plath's nature poems, we find ourselves in the liminal space between the internal and external, where, as Stephen Spender observes, "if there are any externals in these poems [...] they exist in an atmosphere where the external is in the immediate process of becoming the internal" (21). In this space, Plath's speakers discover the ability to impose a subjective vision on the natural scene, tapping into a visual control of subjective reality through perception once again. Here, as Adrianne Kalfopoulou argues, "these poems take on by taking in, and progressively blurring, the boundaries between the perceiver and the world perceived," an idea echoed in Elisabeth Bronfen's description of these poems as ones where "the lyric persona, through fusing with nature, indeed discovering in the strangeness of the natural world an externalization of her private fantasies, nevertheless re-emerges as the agent of the event" (Kalfopoulou 40)(Bronfen 67). Plath renders this blurry transcendence like the artist Paul Klee, whose paintings inspired a set of her ekphrastic poems and who, as Leonard Scigaj informs us, "believed in the artist as Creator of his canvas Universe, achieving a god-like orderly synthesis between psyche and external reality that has metaphysical implications" (234). Further, blurred vision can act as a catalyst similarly to Elizabeth

Minton's manipulation of her own perception and Agnes Higgins's desire to alter her husband's features. Plath lands upon this technique as early as 1956 in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" where, as Sally Bayley argues, the speaker "sees things too clearly, and it disappoints her poetic sensibility. Aesthetically speaking, she would prefer some obfuscation, something more cloudy" ("Sublime Encounters 103). Finally, she discovers in what she calls "those spasmodic / Tricks of radiance" – light tricking the eye – a miraculous potential to transform the world around her in playful ways (CP 57). It is the glimmering feathers of the rook, in the end, that provide the speaker with "A brief respite from fear / Of total neutrality" (CP 57). As in "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," Plath's nature poems often involve speakers who resist seeing too clearly, favouring this crepuscular vision as an antidote to the effacement of neutrality. Plath's subjects come to heed what Bayley identifies as "the tenets of the Romantic artist," a palimpsestic treatment of nature as a canvas on which to render visible the workings of the internal self ("Sublime Encounters" 231).

Tim Kendall argues that "the brutality" of Plath's *Ariel* poetry lies in its departure from the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief in nature as "an expression or embodiment of spiritual truth" where "The dilemma for Plath's personas is that they are Emersonians in a brutal, non-Emersonian universe" (30, 26). Indeed, Plath's personae frequently feel hostility towards their environments, signalling the alienation Ahmed discusses – an opposition to a state of flow. Yet in these late poems, any hostility the speakers feel seems to come from beyond nature, as a kind of affective predisposition. For this reason, I agree with Adrianne Kalfopoulou's caveat that "it is important to emphasize the implications of gender in relation to Emersonian romanticism," deeming Plath's speakers and their "vulnerability" to the elements "reflective of a modern 'I' that does not share Emerson's confidence" (898). In Plath's late nature poems, the alienation of her speakers manifests in the theme of voicelessness, as several scholars have noted, particularly apparent in three of Plath's late nature poems, "The Moon and the Yew Tree," (1961) "Little Fugue," (1962) and "Elm," (1962). Kate Moses, for example, argues that in "Elm" there is the motif of "being silenced as ominous, menacing, or downright harmful" where, as William H. Pritchard contends, "the poet's tongue sticks" similarly to the speaker of "Daddy" – "The tongue stuck in my jaw" (Moses 91)(Pritchard 76)(CP 223). Christina Britzolakis has also observed this voicelessness in the "O-gape of complete despair," which she interprets as "a grimace of frozen utterance" in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (*Theatre of Mourning* 107) and for Sally Bayley, this same image indicates a moment where "language fails to translate the overwhelming experience of pain and terror" ("Sublime Encounters" 103). I contend that

where these scholars justly recognise blocked vocal self-narration, these speakers use the landscape as as visual alternative for the purposes of self-knowledge.

Moreover, taking Plath's poems as a unit, this imagery of failed speech can be linked to the imposing masculine figure of the father, implicating him in these speakers' inability to self-narrate through words. The blackness of "Little Fugue" also appears to refer to the inky blackness of the dead father's language, the "black statements" and his "voice / Black and leafy" (CP 187-188), which reappears in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" as the Gothic tree's "message" of "blackness — blackness and silence" (CP 173). The German voice in "Little Fugue" is also described as "A yew hedge of orders," and the description of it as "barbarous" recalls the "barb wire snare" of "Daddy" too, where the speaker's stultified speech contrasts the more imposing voice of the father: "Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak" (CP 188, 223). The ending of "Elm," with Plath's typical epizeuxis – "These are the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill" – also recalls the "wars, wars, wars" and "back, back, back" that indicate stunted speech in "Daddy" (CP 193, 222, 224). In these poems, as Bayley suggests, "something is perpetually being lost, [...] perhaps identity itself," but it is also the father's compromising impact on the speaker's identity, assured through language, that these poems explore ("Sublime Encounters" 94).

As such, these speakers must find an alternative mode of self-knowledge. In these poems, they thus transform the landscape into a mindscape, a visceral vortex of shifting images that reflect a blurry disintegration of the boundary between the speaker and the natural environment. Here, they attempt to work through their personal histories in pursuit of self-knowledge and the recuperation of identity. Bayley confirms this link I see between Plath's visual artistic sensibilities and her poetic treatment of nature, suggesting that Plath employs "Romantic landscapes as a means of poetic self-representation in which the process of painterly composition functions as a metaphor for self-constitution" ("Sublime Encounters" 92). To this observation, I would add that these late tree poems indicate a movement toward a visual system of meaning, away from the linguistic, at the level of content. As Bayley notes, "It is perhaps only through a synaesthetic crossing of sensory wire that the speaker can deal with the black (buried) statements of her past. [...] In order for privacy to exist, something should always go unspoken" ("Sublime Encounters" 101). These are poems that suit Jacqueline Rose's suggestion that Plath sometimes "write[s] along the edge of language where words fill with an orality they have only partially subsumed, where to speak is to mouth or to tongue" (35). The poems themselves are characterised by a kaleidoscopic flurry of images and abortive statements, where blurriness manifests as the

dizzying experience of not knowing quite where we are in time or space. Here sounds come and go – "Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse" ("Elm") – and there are "Fumy, spiritous mists" and moving clouds that obscure the speaker's vision – "I simply cannot see where there is to get to" ("The Moon and the Yew Tree")(CP 192, 172-173). The speaker herself is no longer a concrete subject — in"Elm," she starts to dissolve: "Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs" (CP 192).

Clearly, we are in the realm of the Kristevan abject, and so we can read Plath's poems are sublime attempts to capture this state of horror, perfectly fitting of Kristeva's mimetic definition: "a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think" (12). This aesthetic capturing, for Plath, involves transmuting the blurry scene into a particularly visual world of private meaning. Bayley calls "Little Fugue" a "visual compensation for auditory failure" where "what cannot be heard, can perhaps be seen" noting the recurring image of the eye in this poem indicative of "a paranoic gazing" where "looking is a compulsive act" ("Sublime Encounters" 100, 101-102). For Britzolakis, this poem reads as "obstructed by catachresis" where nature is transformed "into a collection of fragmentary, cryptic signs" (*Theatre of Mourning* 115-116). Indeed, the "Black yew, white cloud" stand in as visual signifiers for moments in the speaker's history, communicated only through an affective image that eludes linguistic sense – "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly" (CP 188). In "The Moon and the Yew Tree," figments of the landscape guide the speaker's eye: "The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape. / The eyes lift after it and find the moon" (CP 173). These images become the center of poetic meaning, all the other images in this poem affiliated with the blue of the moon and the black of the tree. In "Elm," natural images provoke introspective questions: "It it the sea you hear in me, / Its dissatisfactions? / Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?" and "Clouds pass and disperse. Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?" (CP 192-193). As the eye feeds on the landscape, the speaking subject sorts through her history, making sense of herself through her past. Where masculine language and its artificial control only stifle these speakers so that they find themselves in a state of identity crisis, Plath's blurring of the borders between subject and object allows them to appropriate the visual resources of the natural landscape as an alternative, private, and feminine system of meaning-making. Nature offers itself as a canvas onto which to project their interiority and muddle through their private histories to emerge as independent agents of their own identities.

Plath's blurry personae demonstrate how her character construction is informed by a rich, sustained philosophy. Here, as Charles Newman observes, "There is no division between the world and her wilful representation of it" (23). Under a paradigm of meaning-making from which they are categorically excluded, Plath's personae instead turn to the power of the visual imagination to make sense of themselves independently, and Plath signals this alternative mode through the visual techniques of dreams and blurriness. In this way, Plath teaches us that although, as Siri Hustvedt argues, "Most of us like to be known as hardheaded thinkers rather than soft-minded dreamers, and we lead toward rigor, not imprecision" – there is something to be said for redefining the connotations of these terms because, "On the other hand, rigidity can have negative connotations and flexibility positive ones" (169). As Elizabeth Minton's story demonstrates, legitimizing a blurry, dreamlike alternative vision of the world can somewhat paradoxically allow for what Wagner sees as "moments of clarity" ("Specialness" 5). In other words, Plath's personaes' alternative visions furnish them with an awareness of their limitations, enabling them to become, as Ahmed writes, "conscious of unhappiness as a mood that seems to surround them" where "The feeling is certainly around, almost as a thickness in the air" (70). This is the thick air of the stuffy, hermetic world beneath the bell jar, of Henry Minton's mind which is full of clocks and where the air is "thick with their accurate ticking" (J 315). Through the visual technique of blurriness, Plath offers her characters an escape route from this world, providing them a means of controlling their subjective reality and forming their identities on their own terms. For Plath's personae, through a dreamlike fusion of the real and the imagined, where meanings can shift and a sense of alienation can be exchanged for a blurry assimilation, there is something vital to be gained from the murky, the veiled, the ambiguous.

Chapter Three
Overwriting/Overriding: Plath's Resistance as Re-Inscription

I am a forward-looking girl and don't stay where I am.
——Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*

Blurriness, as my previous chapter reveals, stands in opposition to Plath's portrayal of a masculine paradigm of certainty and rigidity. I see a fundamental connection in Plath's work between this creative blurriness, or draw to the ambiguous, and the final visual technique I will discuss: Plath's method of writing back to, by reimagining and re-inscribing, the stultifying images of womanhood upheld and circulated by a masculinist cultural agenda. Facilitating this process of re-inscription is what Greta Gerbig and Andrea Müller-Wood identify as "the ambiguity of literary language," which they view as "an omnipresent stylistic feature in Sylvia Plath's work and intrinsically linked to her use of intertextuality" (55). While Gerbig and Müller-Wood suggest that this ambiguity stems from a "desire to communicate" which "drove Plath to use aesthetic strategies that ultimately subjected her writing to ambiguities rooted in the very system of language and hence ones she cannot ever escape," drawing attention to the pitfalls of her ambiguity, I would argue that we can also see this ambiguity working as part of her subversive strategy of overcoming ostensibly fixed meanings for the purposes of a personalised resignification (89). In this way, Plath succeeds in harnessing ambiguity to foreground a feminist vision in her work. While Gerbig and Müller-Wood see her poetry as "creating a multitude of possible references" and "diversify[ing] the expectations and interpretations of her readers in a way that may be contrary to her own intentions," beyond the overtly intertextual pieces, I see this technique as one that is effective for her character construction (77).

The visual nature of this process of re-inscription lies in its similarity to Plath's ekphrastic method. Scholars such as Leonard Scigaj, Jane Hedley, Judith Kroll, Christina Britzolakis, and Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty have commented on the way in which Plath uses visual art as a basis for the construction of narrative, transforming static images into personalised scenes of patriarchal confrontation. Specifically, Plath gives a voice to the otherwise silent feminine figures in these paintings, all of which are painted by men, meaning the ekphrastic poems are, as Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty has noted, "powerfully gendered" (117). This gendering is two-pronged, existing at the level of both form and content. In terms of form, as Hedley explains, "the relationship between poetry and painting that is presupposed by ekphrastic writing is often implicitly and sometimes explicitly gender inflected" (44). Moreover, de Nervaux-Gavoty also recognizes that the content of these

poems reflects their formal agenda, preoccupied as they are with "ambiguous and inadequate father figures," "the question of literary tradition," and "masculine literary authority," a view Christina Britzolakis upholds in her own analysis of Plath's ekphrastic poems, where she sees a preoccupation with "an oppressive sense of obstructed communication" in which the "oracular source" is "within the dead father" ("Plath and De Chirico" 174). The significance of Plath's use of paintings for this engagement with masculine literary authority has, however, not yet been richly explored. Yet it appears especially significant that Plath uses a visual medium to spark this engagement, taking a temporary detour via the visual mode in order to re-enter the literary one and speaking back to this authority while simultaneously problematising the voyeuristic gaze of male artists, imposing her own narrative onto the paintings, and reclaiming them for her own imaginative work. If, as de Nervaux-Gavoty has suggested, "These ekphrastic poems are actually the scene of a painful confrontation with Plath's literary fathers, an attempt to reclaim a voice for herself," then they are also evidence of Plath's use of an external, visual platform through which to stage this confrontation (117).

Nevertheless, this engagement with masculine literary tradition extends beyond the ekphrastic poems, and I contend that Plath's technique of visual-to-verbal re-inscription remains present beyond her ekphrastic pieces. Numerous scholars, including Julia Gordon-Bramer, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, Diane Middlebrook, Heather Clark, and Steven Gould Axelrod have noted Plath's intertextual engagement with her literary forefathers and the male literary figures of her time. Julia Gordon-Bramer discusses Plath's allusions to the work of Dylan Thomas while Axelrod traces connections between Plath's imagery and that of Theodore Roethke and William Shakespeare. Goodspeed-Chadwick, Middlebrook, and Clark have also all commented on an identifiable back and forth between Plath's own poetry and that of Ted Hughes, her husband. Middlebrook describes this relationship as "an obsessive game of tag with each other's images," at once acknowledging the presence of Plath's competitive streak in her poetic process as well as the way in which she invokes her husband's work by borrowing his poetic *images* (265). Middlebrook's phrasing is useful, because it recognises that intertextuality inherently responds to literary images at the same time as it responds to the written word. In other words, intertextuality involves working with the distinctive image(s) words form in the mind, capable of being reproduced through a set of similar or shuffled words. By noting Plath's use of this process, I am interested in building upon Fan Jinghua's assertion that in Plath's late poems, "the ekphrastic principle is an internalized method" (207). While Jinghua finds this technique apparent in Plath's use of language to create her own set of poetic images where "every image [...] can be understood as

a node pointing to visual entities that link to each other or dynamically interact," I see it as part of her subversive resignification of masculinist literary and cultural influences (207).

Lynda K. Bundtzen's description of the Plath-Hughes manuscripts, where Plath's "words are on top and one peeks at the other side, often finding her ink has bled through, indelibly splotching and staining Hughes's work," provides a useful visual metaphor for what I understand to be a feature of Plath's work throughout – an overwriting and overriding rendered through an invocation and re-inscription of the iconographic and linguistically constructed images of the patriarchal discourse to which her work responds ("Burning the Letters" 237). I am particularly interested in how Plath's visual poetics of re-inscription enable her speakers to resist these narratives of conformity and the impact of them on their identities through. As such, my focus in this chapter is less on Plath's intertextual engagement and more on how I see her making use of the technique of visual re-inscription within her poetry and fiction to construct her characters and their methods of self-representation. Through this analysis, I aim to uncover one way in which Plath discovers what Anita Helle notes is an emphasis of "Feminist and poststructuralist methodologies" where "the usefulness of the fragment and the palimpsest as tools for critical incision" is evident ("Archival Matters" 7). Specifically, I contend that Plath's re-inscriptions work in two key ways. The first method is much like the visual techniques previously discussed in this dissertation, where Plath's personae superimpose a personalised, sometimes even hallucinatory, vision through their subjective experience of visual perception combined with imagination. Her personae come to recognise the concealed, internal, repressed psychic state, because Plath renders it visible through their subjective self-perception, re-inscribing the exterior through a visual revelation of the interior. In this way, Plath's registers the injunctions of the status-quo as impossible to follow, re-inscribing mass marketed images of conformity through an exposure of the internal psychic distress of her personae. The second method is one that functions like a reversal of the ekphrastic process. I trace a connection between a recurring resistance to stasis in Plath's work and the desire to eschew masculine surveillance of women. The hyperreal image of "woman" is a static and flat one, but Plath constructs speakers who evade this stasis and the mapping of the body through the constant motion of rebirth and transcendence. In this way, I suggest that in constructing her late poetic personae, Plath was informed by her ekphrastic process, which entails a recognition of the possibilities for self-redefinition through visual-verbal re-inscription.

Reclaiming Voice and Re-Inscribing the Body

In "Daddy" (1962), Plath's speaker takes up this process of re-inscription in an overt confrontation with the dead father figure as a method of reclaiming her history. Throughout the poem, the father's monopolisation of the speaker's identity through language is apparent in Plath's exhaustive use of repetition which produces a sense of stifled voice:

> I never could talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
>
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich.
> I could hardly speak.
> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene. (CP 222-223)

As is the case in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther struggles with her grasp on the German language which she closely identifies with her dead father, the speaker of "Daddy" has linked the German language to the father figure and, by extension, implicated both of them in the stymieing of her voice. In other words, the father, whose impact on his daughter's identity is felt in her description of him as a "black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years" and in her attempted suicide to "get back, back, back to you," limits the speaker's voice, negatively impacting her sense of self (CP 222, 224). Inasmuch as this poem is about the silenced daughter, though, it is also about her use of an image – "the picture I have of you" – to reassert herself and rediscover her voice (CP 223). As Anita Helle notes, "In organizing 'Daddy' around an explicit and central photographic reference [...] Plath's poem insists that the annotation be performed more on the speaker's own terms" ("Photographic Chamber" 41). The photograph allows the speaker to make sense of herself through a metaphorical murder of the father figure ("there's a stake in your fat, black heart"), and thus silenced, the speaker's own voice can resurface (CP 224). For Robin Peel, "What Plath accomplishes [...] is a re-possession of the photograph's central figure" but I would add that the speaker in turn succeeds, significantly, in repossessing herself (45). Here, we can understand the technique of re-inscription as involving the visual imagination to recast what is visually perceived, producing a voice reliant on this exchange. As I will now explore, with a particular focus on *The Bell Jar*, this process of reclamation is not dramatically different from the technique of Plath's ekphrastic poems, where the speaker uses a visual basis to take up the theme of feminine silencing.

The Bell Jar exhibits a preoccupation with the treatment of the female body as a culturally sustained image to which women are expected to conform. This image is what Jean

Baudrillard would call the "hyperreal," or "the real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself" (145). Like the image of the happy housewife Betty Friedan discusses, this image no longer refers to a real object, because she does not exist, and so it becomes an illusion obliterating the "contradiction between the real and the imaginary" (Baudrillard 146). Esther's recognition of the impossibility of maintaining this idealized image of femininity is showcased in her continual desire to wrench herself away from a patriarchal dictation of feminine identity. When Esther goes to see a movie, her consciousness of the predictable plot summarises the pervasiveness of the prescriptive 1950s image of woman – "Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along" (TBJ 42). Esther's sardonic tone, in this moment, registers her cognizance of that which bell hooks explains – that "giving audiences what is real is precisely what movies do not do. They give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real" (*Reel to Real* 1). More than merely pedagogical, the cinema in *The Bell Jar* is also a tool of indoctrination. In particular, as Pat MacPherson recognises, there is a link between the dissemination of this image of femininity and a cultural maintenance of the need to conform: "The dark underside of this self-improvement road to female identity, reassuringly sign-posted though it is, is that the more thorough the instructions and illustrations, the more thorough the surveillance and regulation of the female body" (9). Through its foregrounding of the impact of masculine surveillance on feminine identity, Esther's rejection of the moviegoing experience can be tied to a moment earlier in the novel, where, returning from a night out, she contemplates "crawling in between the bed sheets and trying to sleep," then decides against it because "that appealed to me about as much as stuffing a dirty, scrawled-over letter into a fresh, clean envelope. I decided to take a hot bath" (TBJ 19). The image Esther constructs here is of her own body "scrawled-over" or inscribed, needing to be cleansed through the ritual of a bath. This image also parallels another instance when Esther's date Marco, who she conceives of as a "woman-hater," holds onto her arm tightly enough to bruise her ("A thumbprint purpled into view") and later smears her cheeks with his blood (106). This masculine marking of the female body brings additionally to mind Plath's "Among the Bumblebees," where the beekeeper makes a "glossy red mark on the thorax" of the queen bee "To see her the better" (JP 60). In all these cases, the female body is nothing more than what Laura Mulvey identifies as "a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing on them the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (834). By

connecting these moments, it becomes apparent that throughout *The Bell Jar*, Esther's identity is controlled through masculine surveillance and that in order to make sense of her own identity, she must reject this control and become her own "maker of meaning."

Mulvey's "ultimate challenge" thus becomes Esther's too – "how to fight the unconscious structured like a language [...] while still caught within the language of the patriarchy" (834). As Esther becomes cognizant of her own dissonance between her exterior image and her interior deviation from this image, her sense of both deviancy and depersonalisation manifests in an inability to recognise her exterior self. These unfamiliar selves appear through the leitmotif of the mirror, where Esther continually fails to recognise her own face, first as a "smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically" then, in a "slightly warmed and much too silver" bureau mirror, a face that "looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury," and finally, looking into her compact, she sees "a sick Indian" (TBJ 18, 19, 112). Esther's paranoia about her deviancy also elsewhere manifests as a desire to hide herself, as though her internal dissent might somehow be visible to the eyes of others. She feels she must make concerted efforts to maintain the concealment of this dissent, as is evident when she decides to be fitted for a diaphragm so that she does not have to remain, to use her words, "'under a man's thumb'" (TBJ 221). On the journey back to the asylum, where she is stationed, she takes comfort in knowing that "with my box in the plain brown paper wrapper on my lap I might have been Mrs. Anybody coming back from a day in town [...]. Gradually the suspicion that Catholics had X-ray eyes diminished, and I grew easy" (TBJ 223). Earlier on, Esther similarly tries to conceal her internal state when she is having her photograph taken for *Mademoiselle*: "I had tried concealing myself in the powder room, but it didn't work" (TBJ 100). During the photoshoot, Esther eventually cries. This moment embodies an externalisation of her internal state entirely against her volition, leaving her feeling "limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal" (TBJ 102). In order to return to an ostensible state of normalcy, Esther tries to conceal herself with makeup, and upon looking into her pocket mirror, she experiences this self-misrecognition again: "The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colors" (TBJ 102). Clearly, what Esther encounters in the mirror is, much like the hallucinations elsewhere in the text and in Plath's oeuvre more broadly, a visual externalisation of her internal state – moments when the reality of her psychic distress can no longer remain concealed beneath her external self.

Plath's understanding of the figure of the double apparent in her Honours thesis on Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, entitled "The Magic Mirror," confirms Esther's encounters with

her reflection as opportunities for independent self-knowledge. Plath writes in the opening of her thesis that "the appearance of the Double is an aspect of man's eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity" adding that "the Double is the form given to any and all personifications of a man's ego in both the psychic and physical world" (MM 1). It is this psychic embodiment that Esther encounters when she looks in the mirror as much as she encounters the physical. While for Esther this encounter feels like a crisis of identity, it is also Plath's overt re-inscription of the hyperreal image, one which breaks it apart and exposes its fallibility. In other words, through the device of the mirror and the subjective, first-person narrative of *The Bell Jar*, Plath exposes the falseness of the image of femininity as constructed by a masculine paradigm that denies women their subjecthood. The visual technique of re-inscribing an image or painting in order to enable her speakers' resignification of images for the purposes of making sense of their own identity is thus apparent even where a concrete image or painting is absent, but where the flattened image of woman is taken up as a signifier. Plath locates in this image a space of potential ambiguity of meaning, where she is able to assert an alternative vision over the dominant vision of 1950s textual and visual culture. For Esther, similarly, these moments of encountering herself in a mirror are ones when she is not subject to the male gaze but rather encounters her own gaze. Looking into a mirror, she finds a feminine, visual space through which to make sense of her identity independently.

According to Plath's thesis, "Dostoevsky implies that recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration" (MM 51). Here, Plath notes a positive possibility embedded within the uncanny encounter with the double – the chance to richly make sense of oneself, to prevent the divided self from falling apart. These moments of defamiliarisation are also not entirely hopeless exhibitions of Esther's crisis of identity, because they act as indications of her awareness of her unhappiness. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, "To be conscious of unhappiness is to be conscious of being 'not,' or of being an 'un,' as lacking the qualities or attributes of happiness. [...] Consciousness of 'being-not' involves self-estrangement: you recognize yourself as the stranger" (82-83). This unhappiness allows her to remain the dissenting character. In other words, Esther is no Agnes from "The Wishing Box" whose desire to conform entirely strips her of the independent desire to make sense of her own identity, to the point that she takes her own life. Nor is Esther like her friend Hilda, who, while walking through town, seems to doubt her own existence because her self-knowledge has become so compromised, seeking confirmation of this existence in the mirrors she passes: "She stared at her reflection in the glossed shop

windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist" (TBJ 100). Hilda's loss of self is directly tied to the patriarchal forces that fail to read her beyond her cultivated exterior. For Esther, she is "possessed" like the heroine of a play she has seen the night before: "when the dybbuk spoke from her mouth its voice sounded so cavernous and deep you couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. Well, Hilda's voice sounded just like the voice of that dybbuk" (TBJ 100). Hilda is so indoctrinated that she dons the masculinized voice of the patriarchy, losing herself entirely. But when Esther looks in mirrors, unlike Hilda, she is not confirming her own existence and seeing only her external self so much as she is finding a feminine, visual space in which she takes stock of her interiority. This process enacts a visual re-inscription of what she sees externally with her self-knowledge, allowing her to resist the reduction of her identity to a mere exterior.

The Movement of Mercury: Re-Invisioning Rebirth as Re-Inscription

Plath's short story "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle" offers a striking meditation on the woman's body as a site of inscription in connection with politics and warfare. The story takes place in a tattoo parlour belonging to a man named Carmey, to which the protagonist pays a visit with her "steady man" Ned Bean (JP 53). The narrator recounts the experiences of a day in the parlour, during which several customers come and go. From the story's opening, with a description of the parlour, it is clear that the one of the story's central preoccupations is this idea of the inscribed female body and the female body as an ideal image. The story commences with a list of tattoo samples hung on the wall, including a set of tattoos *for* women — "For the ladies, butterflies, birds of paradise, baby heads smiling or in tears, take your choice" — and a set of tattoos *of* women — "Not to mention cowgirls, hula girls, mermaids and movie queens, ruby-nippled and bare as you please" (JP 53). Ned and Carmey, the male figures in the story, both possess voyeuristic desires, expressed in a moment where Carmey confesses his dream of photographing a woman with a butterfly tattoo: "'I could make a lot of sweet dough if I got a picture of the butterfly on a woman'" (JP 105). This understanding of the female body as commodity, evident in Carmey's association between this photograph and money, reappears where the narrator describes Ned's response as he "peers in the general direction of [her] stomach as at some high-grade salable parchment" (JP 105). Just as Esther imagines herself an inscribed letter in *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist of "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle" envisions her bare skin as a piece of writing paper to be sullied by men. She is also "salable" and a method of income for Carmey, reduced to a corporate commodity.

Similarly to *The Bell Jar*, Plath's technique in this story is to subvert the constructed, imagined image of woman through a re-inscription of that image. In particular, Plath uses of the temporal nature of narrative to conduct a negotiation of imagination and reality to enable this re-inscription. Fairly early on, the speaker wonders about Carmey's wife when she briefly comes up in conversation, "does he use her for a come-on: Laura, the Tattooed Lady, a living masterpiece, sixteen years in the making. Not a white patch on her, ladies and gentlemen—look all you want to" (JP 97). Later, another image of Laura vanquishes this original image when Carmey finally describes her as "white as the day she was born. Why, she *hates* tattoos" (JP 105). The protagonist's fantasy image of Laura – "a butterfly poised for flight on each breast, roses blooming on her buttocks, a gold-guarding dragon on her back and Sinbad the Sailor in six colors on her belly, a woman with Experience written all over her, a woman to learn from in this life" is subsequently re-inscribed through Carmey's correction, where Plath uses the temporal nature of narrative in order to toy with the real and the imagined (JP 105-106). This method forces the reader to reflect on Laura's initial characterisation, to re-encounter her as two separate versions of herself. This re-encountering works similarly to re-inscription, where Laura Carmey's body illustrates the continual misperceptions inherent in the objectifying gaze. Additionally, this idea of male-defined "experience" somehow written on the body recalls Esther's obsessive fear over the way in which her own experience might become visually apparent upon losing her virginity. She compares this event to a trip to Europe: "I'd come home, and if I looked closely in the mirror I'd be able to make out a little white Alp at the back of my eye. Now I thought that if I looked into the mirror tomorrow I'd see a doll-size Constantin sitting in my eye and smiling out at me" (TBJ 82). The idea that Laura's experience might likewise be visually apparent is evidence of the narrator's ideological influence and confusion of the private internal and the public external. Reading this stories together, we can understand them both as reflecting the 1950s paranoia stemming from surveillance.

Intriguingly, however, the protagonist herself, and no one else apparently, ever sees Laura's body in reality, concealed as she is beneath her winter clothing, "wrapped to the chin in a woolly electric-blue coat" (JP 106). The speaker can only "imagine her body, death-lily-white and totally bare—the body of a woman immune as a nun to the eagle's anger, the desire of the rose" (JP 106). As such, Laura is a figure set apart from the other characters in this story, who seek to have their bodies inscribed. Plath's exhaustive use of symbolism to make overt connections between these tattoos and American politics suggests that Laura's absence of tattoos represents a resistance of her indoctrination. A sailor who comes in to get a

tattoo of an eagle – a deeply patriotic American symbol – is thus Laura's opposite. As the tattoo ink mingles with the redness of his blood, he asks, "'How much to write Japan under that?' (JP 101). Considering the story's preoccupation with money, the symbolic eagle of America who bleeds red (the colour of communism) suggests that the story responds directly to the Second Red Scare. Thus, Plath draws a parallel here, as she does in *The Bell Jar* through Esther's fear of discovered internal dissent and the Rosenberg trial, between the paranoia that was part and parcel of McCarthy era surveillance. Here, Plath frames as simultaneous the desire, evident of indoctrination, to bear tattoos – external, permanent signifiers of allegiance to the United States – with a desire to evade this permanence through Esther's chosen method: concealment. We see this not only in Laura's full coat but also in the request of a young boy for a tattoo of a name – Ruth – on his wrist, asking for it "'Right here … so I can cover it up with a watch if I want to'" (JP 103). Worth noting is the possible double meaning of the word watch, at once the physical watch itself but simultaneously alluding to the surveillance of McCarthyism, of being *watch*ed.

Plath thus uses the mental images of Laura but also the re-inscription of these images to trouble the flattening to exterior of women's identities, framed as tied to the ideologies and paranoia of the McCarthy era. If "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle" is concerned with surveillance, then it is also preoccupied with the idea of permanence. Laura, who never speaks once in the story, embodies a resistance to the indoctrination. Silent and un-tattooed, she exists only as a kind of spectre, created in the minds of the men and of the narrator herself. She remains enigmatic and unknowable, because she resists being seen, marked, or inscribed, and she also resists speech. As a sort of invisible and inaudible character, she has opted out of this. Moreover, Plath writes her character in such a way as to suggest that by resisting her husband's bodily markings, by opting out of this discourse, she can become self-assured enough to command not only her husband but also the entire room. This is evident in the narrator's description of Carmey as wordless in her presence, echoing Henry in Elizabeth's triumphant daydream in "Sunday at the Mintons'": "The starch is gone out of Carmey now, and the gay talk" (JP 106). Laura, who is not visually fixed or mappable, subject to the surgical inscription of the tattoo's needle or the prying eyes of those in the tattoo parlour, reveals to the reader what Susan R. Van Dyne identifies – that "the opposite poles of the cultural interpretations inscribed on the female body which appear rigidly fixed" are actually "destabilized by a fluid exchange between them; that any stereotype displays an explosive, disruptive power when it is exploited to its extreme" (82). While for Laura this fluidity – the constantly evolving perceptions of her in the eyes of the narrator – exists through her

concealment, as I will now examine, elsewhere in Plath's work, the masculinist inscription of the body can be overcome through continual movement and transformation.

Stasis, for Plath, must be avoided, because it cannot allow for transformation. As the speaker of "Edge" recognises, perfection is only attainable in stillness, but stillness is also death: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (CP 272). Esther's anxiety is similar; she is fearful of committing herself to any singular path in life, as is clear when she is having her photograph taken for *Mademoiselle* and is forced to select a prop to illustrate her chosen path of becoming a writer. Esther's crisis is this: "When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know" (TBJ 100-101). She resists the idea of being unable to change her path, manifested here in her anxiety about having the photograph – also permanent, as Roland Barthes notes in *Camera Lucida* when he posits that "the Photograph mechanically respects what could never be repeated existentially" – act as a symbol of consignment to this path (4). Hence, the photograph functions as a tool through which to create the illusion of the coherent, unfragmented self, a self that persists, haunting the present and the future. Plath makes clear that the woman's inability to control her own identity through the continual possibility of re-molding the self is constrained by the very same, static, hyperreal image of woman. Her agency thus relies on what Butler calls the "temporal dimensions" of "performativity" (xxiv). Plath interrogates the idea of identity in the same way Butler does, where Butler asks "what grounds the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent?" (22). As such, in her construction of characters, Plath constructs personae who are entirely resistant of this notion of identity as something fixed and stable.

The chronic aspiration to perfection, Plath reveals to us, will result in an inability to make sense of one's own identity, to know oneself. This is what the narrator of her short story "America! America!" (1963) comes to realise and calls the "nihil of belonging": "The privilege of being anybody was turning its other face — to the pressure of being everybody; ergo, no one" (JP 56). Plath thus frames conformity to a feminine ideal as an act of self-erasure. Esther, in her attempt to resist this erasure, would prefer to be like the mercury she finds on the floor while in hospital: "I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again" (TBJ 183). Esther's love of the mercury hints at a recurring theme in Plath's work, namely the woman in motion, continually able to redefine herself, resistant of the fragmentation produced by patriarchal forces. As Frederick Buell notes,

Plath's late poetic speaker "will image herself (even yearningly) in terms of frighteningly stupefied, static, insensate object, something utterly determined and therefore almost peaceful [...] or she will image herself as the destructively powerful phoenix-witch-bitch-goddess" (147). In Esther's case, we see a paranoia about an inability to change, but elsewhere in Plath's archive, this paranoia is exchanged for an escape of these limitations. As Annette Lavers notes, "The living flesh is felt as essentially vulnerable, a prey to axes, doctors' needles, butchers' and surgeons' knives," where "metaphors include a cut, a contusion, the tragedy of thalidomide, fever, an accident, a wound, paralysis [...]: her poetry is a 'garden of tortures' in which mutilation and annihilation take nightmarishly protean forms" (104-105). Where the living flesh is continually inscribed and defiled, subject through this vulnerability to further patriarchal constraints, death is coded as a method of temporarily overcoming the vulnerability of the flesh. Moreover, this temporary overcoming enables the persona to reset and redefine herself, to erase these inscriptions like Esther does when she gets into the hot bath which doubles as a sort of purge or, to use another metaphor from *The Bell Jar*, to cast away her clothing – what Newman calls "her body's thesaurus" – from the roof of a New York hotel building (40). As Deborah S. Gentry acknowledges, Plath's personaes' suicides "are actions in which each character attempts to redefine herself in contrast to societal stereotypes," and in this way, the act becomes "repoliticized into an existential act of defiance and rebellion" (16).

The return to wholeness through suicide can only be temporary, however, because in Plath's literature, to die is to be reborn, and to be reborn means a return to this vulnerable flesh. Judith Kroll thus identifies Plath's personaes' ultimate method out of eschewing the inscribed female body, where "The true self (the positive, whole, reborn self) is associated with artistic creativity" which allows her to "triumph over the negative, male-defined aspects of these typical female roles" (10-11). Plath therefore constructs figures who entirely transcend the limits of their patriarchal worlds, which involves transcending the body itself. As Leonard Sanazaro observes, the ending of "Lady Lazarus," where the speaker revives herself, independent of the surgeons, exhibits a moment where "the efficacy of an exterior redemptive and punitive power is denied; the center of power becomes the individual's ability to create the self" (90). To transgress, for Plath, is to be able to know the self fully and independently – as Sanazaro puts it, "by the strength of her own will" (90). The connection I am making here is thus between Plath's recognition of the treatment of the feminine body as a commodifiable image, controlled ("scrawled over") by masculine figures, and the

construction of her late poetic figures – the difficult to describe, "melt[ing]", "[shriek]ing," "[foam]ing" figures of her famous poems "Ariel" and "Lady Lazarus" (CP 239, 246).

Transcendence and motion, in Plath's poetic world, are thus one and the same. In *Art on My Mind*, bell hooks explains her definition of transgression: "I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement" (133). As I discussed in the previous chapter, Plath visually represents these boundaries as hard lines: "two white clapboard walls, a mock orange bush and a clump of birches and a box hedge" that Esther describes surrounding her and cutting her off while in her suburban home, making her imagine herself "small as a doll in a doll's house" (TBJ 120). This environment is one of stasis. Esther finds herself inert and uninspired as she tries to write in this setting, recounting, "I sat like that for an hour, trying to think what would come next, and in my mind, the barefoot doll in her mother's old yellow nightgown sat and stared into space as well" (TBJ 120). Here, Esther embodies the desire Luce Irigaray expresses: "Alone, I rediscover my mobility," she writes, "Movement is my habitat. My only rest is motion. Whoever imposes a roof over my head, wears me out. Let me go where I have not yet arrived" (25). As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, Scigaj is right to assert that Plath's early ekphrastic poems set the scene for some of her most trailblazing late poetic techniques. The method of re-inscription with which Plath experimented early on becomes a foundational method of allowing the reader access to the interiority of her characters, revealed through a visual method so as to challenge the idea of woman as undifferentiated, as nothing more than a cultural commodity and signifier. By the time we arrive at *Ariel*, Plath's personae are no longer hesitantly trespassing into the realm of the psyche, the imagination, and the visual blur like Elizabeth Minton and Agnes Higgins. Through Plath's visual portrayal, they themselves become moving, blurry, shocking re-inscriptions of the hyperreal image of femininity.

Conclusion
Beyond Plath and the Written Word

Poetry has no proof nor plan nor evidence by decree or in any
other way. From somewhere in the twilight realm of sound a spirit
of belief flares up at the point where meaning stops and the
unreality of what seems most real floods over us.
——Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*

Plath's incorporation of her painterly sensibilities engenders alternative systems of meaning to speech and the written word. It is this use of her visual poetics that allows the personal vision of her personae to become accessible and concrete, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate throughout this dissertation. Plath offers this alternative view through a visual mode – a move away from language, which remains co-opted by male figures in Plath's texts, to a private sphere of meaning-making through which to make sense of the self. Most importantly, I have sought to make clear that Plath's visual artistic sensibilities play a vital role in the construction of her personae, granting them a feminine space through which to become the agents of their own identities.

All three chapters of my intervention have taken up the idea of the "real" and the "imagined," defining the field of the real as one that not only includes the objectively real but also the subjectively real, where the imagination itself forms part of that reality. As Eileen Aird recognizes, "Recovery," in *The Bell Jar*, "lies in the acceptance of the differences between the external world and that revealed by creative insight," where "the artist must accept that his internal world may be more real to him than the common world of actions and events" (92). Thus, necessarily, Plath's work renegotiates the very idea of the real itself, and the effect of this negotiation is a crucial aspect of Plath's creation of personae capable of controlling their personal experience. As part of this renegotiation, Plath reinforces the idea that imaginative fictions produce real, operational effects and new ways of seeing. Through the devices of hallucinations and mental images, her personae succeed in projecting internal states outwards, through hallucinations, or inwards, towards the mind's eye. They discover, through this process, an alternative, visual system of self-narration outside of language through which to take control of their own identity formation. Plath also uses the juxtaposing techniques of cubist lines and impressionistic blurriness to set up a dichotomy between the masculine forces that continually seek to appropriate her personaes' means of identity formation, textually or verbally, and the subjective realm of the feminine imagination. Through this blurriness, Plath's personae can combat their feelings of alienation, transmuting the world around them into a more amenable landscape reflective of the psyche. Finally, her

use of the technique of re-inscription, traceable to an ekphrastic methodology, establishes the static happy housewife image as a failure of representation, an oppressive tool unable to withstand the continual rebirths and unceasing movement of the living woman.

Through her visual techniques, Plath unleashes and exposes the otherwise repressed imagination of the 1950s suburban housewife. When Sara Ahmed argues that "you have to experience limitations *as* limitations" as a way to "make life seem more rather than less limited," she refers to this process as "the act of noticing limitations" (70). Inherent in Ahmed's diction here is the understanding of imaginative work as an *act*. For Plath, the visual is the catalyst for this act of recognition, one which, as Ahmed writes of imagination, enables one "to question the wisdom they have received and to ask whether what is good for all is necessarily good for them" (62). In this sense, Plath's personaes' imaginations and dreams do not work like the little girl's "penchant" for "dreams" according to Simone de Beauvoir, where "She sinks so often into such nonsense because she has no grasp on the world; if she had to *act*, she would be forced to see clearly, whereas she can *wait* in the fog" (352). In other words, Plath's imaginative episodes do not comprise what Beauvoir terms narcissist dramas, which occur "at the expense of real life" (680). Plath differs from Beauvoir in that her dreamscapes do not represent a loosening of a grasp on the world so much as a defamiliarization and interrogation of that world so as not to lose a grasp on the self. Plath's psychic dramas play out in worlds not entirely divorced from the real world, embodying the inherent duality of experience where at once, the "stupid pupil" *has* to take it all in, but at the same time, this reality might be slightly altered if imaginatively and visually recast ("Tulips", CP 160). Acts of the visual imagination constitute a subversion of the patriarchal impact to feminine identity formation, allowing for the recuperation of a personalised vision of the world, which stands in opposition to what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as "the terror and self-loathing that results when a woman is made to disregard her personal sense of danger, to accept as real what contradicts her perception of her own situation" (143). In other words, Plath's personae do not dismiss their struggles but rather acknowledge, as Siri Hustvedt does, that "Imaginary experience is also experience," and that these experiences of the imagination can work alchemically to affect experience as a whole through the processes of perception (447). Plath's personae do not wait in the fog; they emerge defiantly from it.

By drawing attention to Plath's interrogation of the limits to self-formation inherent in the textual discourse of her era, where this interrogation deals closely with what is subjectively real, I have aimed to preclude the essentialist misunderstanding of Plath's

personalised method of feminine character construction as presenting a universal method of finding a new language. My dissertation thus represents a study of a single writer's use of a limited set of visual techniques to construct characters and texts that critique the limitations of the dominant mid-twentieth century's textual discourse, disseminated through TV, film, and magazines. In one sense, Plath's alternative vision to the dominant discursive mandate of her era constitutes what Audre Lorde sees as a prerequisite for the dismantling of the master's house: "It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish" (112). In another sense, Plath's criticism is limited because, as Renée R. Curry has noted, her work "reflect[s] white worlds and white imaginations" (170). As much as Plath succeeds in exposing what she calls in her "Cambridge Notes" the "relief" of knowing "that there is someone outside oneself who is not happy all the time," this unhappiness is endemic only to the white, middle- to upper-class suburban housewife of her era (JP 264). Thus, the impact of the advent of these media on literary narrative techniques, particularly with a view to considering a diverse group of postmodern and contemporary authors and poets, remains a worthy subject of future research.

Through the intervention I have sought to make in this dissertation, I hope to have surfaced an aspect of Plath's process that serves to illustrate the chronic repercussions of underestimating the imaginative ability of women authors. I began this study with a contestation of M.L. Rosenthal's categorisation of Plath as a confessional writer, a view that, though continually disputed in Plath scholarship, has nevertheless resulted in a perennial failure to endorse Plath's imaginative capacity to write characters different to herself for bigger, political purposes. There is still more work to be done not only to amend this oversight but also to fully acknowledge the implications of Plath's methodological genius for the construction of her personae. This future work should necessarily involve a sustained re-examination of Plath's character construction in a way that does not simply avoid but actively rejects the pitfall of conflating the poet and her personae. Plath did not write for herself alone. Her character construction reveals a self-conscious recognition of the constructed limits to women's self-understanding in a patriarchal world where she is deliberately treated as a flat, two-dimensional image, where her conformity is framed as a necessity for survival. By denying this truth as an objective one, contrasting it with a subjective alternative, she constructs personae who are able to challenge the voyeurism of their worlds through the salvation of their personal vision. Plath's characters are women who meet this gaze, who resist its authority, and who fiercely and defiantly stare right back.

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