The Talking Cure

"If Writing is not an Outlet, what is?"

Sylvia Plath and *The Bell Jar*

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> [He] helped me up on the wall, and in my tight skin, I tried to step over the spikes; they pierced my skin, my hands, and I felt nothing, thinking from the great distance that I might at last lie on a bed of spikes and not feel it, like the yogi, like Celia Copplestone [sic], crucified, near an anthill, at last, peace, and the nails went through my hands. . . .

The Journals of Sylvia Plath[1]

Sylvia Plath's identification with Celia Coplestone's crucifixion is but one of the many striking similarities between the worlds of *The Cocktail Party* and *The Bell Jar.* Despite the extensive research on Plath's work, little has been written about her fascination with psychiatry and its importance to her life and art. Until recently, we have had few clues into the nature of Plath's mental illness that culminated in her suicide in February 1963 at the age of 30 or the details of her psychiatric treatment in 1953, after her first breakdown and suicide attempt. *The Bell Jar,* published in England one month before her death, describes the events leading up to Plath's initial collapse. However, we learn surprisingly little about Esther Greenwood's experiences with Dr. Nolan, the sympathetic female psychiatrist who treats and apparently cures the autobiographical heroine. The nature of the doctor-patient relationship has remained enshrouded in mystery, and even Plath's biographer, Edward Butscher, has been unable to offer much information about this important subject.

Within the last few years, however, the publication of two major autobiographical volumes—Plath's massive correspondence, *Letters Home* (1975), and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982)—has deepened our understanding of the gifted writer who committed suicide during the height of her creative powers. Her journals confirm the intimate relationship between the creative and therapeutic process. Not only was Plath in psychiatric treatment, and more than once with the same psychiatrist, but the therapy lasted longer and was more valuable to her life and art than anyone has publicly suggested. She understood the theory and practice of psychoanalysis better than any of the writers we have discussed—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot—and her psychiatric experiences were more positive and insightful than those of her predecessors. Psychotherapy allowed her to discover and verbalize the severe repressed conflicts of her "murderous self," and she used the material of her own analysis for die themes of her art. Rather than implying, as A. Alvarez does in *The Savage God,* that her fierce creativity was responsible for the infernal vision at the end of her life, we may view her art—as we viewed Eliot's—as an attempt to master and work through her psychological conflicts, to heal through die creation of literature the deep injuries that had brought her into therapy.[2] To this extent, *The Bell Jar* resembles *The Cocktail Party.* Both writers suffered major breakdowns, and their psychiatric odyssey provided them with the theme and the medium of the case study for their later works.

And yet there is also an obvious difference between the two artists. The mocking irony of *The Bell Jar* is that even as it dramatizes Esther Greenwood's collapse and apparent recovery, autobiography intrudes to remind us of the failure of therapy and art to sustain Sylvia Plath's life.

Aurelia Schober Plath's introduction to her daughter's 500-page correspondence, containing 696 letters Sylvia wrote to her mother between the years 1950 and 1963, offers a biographically revealing, though highly selective, sketch of the early years of the artist's life. The most striking detail of the mother-daughter relationship was the element of symbiotic fusion. "Throughout her prose and poetry, Sylvia fused parts of my life with hers from time to time."[3] In the "Introduction" Mrs. Plath acknowledges the wish behind the preservation of her daughter's letters. "Throughout these years I had the dream of one day handing Sylvia the huge packet of letters. I felt she could make use of them in stories, in a novel, and through them meet herself at the varied stages in her own development . . ." (p. 3). We can already see a symbiotic element working here: the mother functions to mirror her daughter's life, to receive and give back Sylvia's reflection, to subordinate herself to and participate vicariously in Sylvia's brilliant career. Later in the "Introduction," Mrs. Plath returns to their symbiotic relationship. "Between Sylvia and me there existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. Understanding this, I learned, as she

grew older, not to refer to previous voluntary confidences on her part" (p. 32). In light of this, it is interesting that mother and daughter revealed so much about each other in print.

But this creates many problems, including the issue of confidentiality. Would Sylvia have consented to the publication of her private letters and journals, with their often scathing references to family and friends? Mrs. Plath must have agonized over this question, for in releasing her daughter's personal writings, the mother exposed herself and others to the intense public scrutiny she had previously avoided. Any biographical or psychoanalytic approach to Plath must by necessity cause pain to the survivors, if only because she mercilessly caricatured them in her writings and quite often alienated them in her life. Nor was her aggression limited to art. She was filled with hostility toward those closest to her, and the publication of her letters and journals invariably opens up the wounds of those who witnessed and participated in the tragedy. In studying her biography, one inevitably must confront her family life, "with its twisted tensions, unreasoning loves and solidarity and loyalty born and bred in blood" *(The Journals,* p. 26). In writing about a young woman who took her own life, one becomes aware of those who loved her who were also symbolically killed in the process. Plath herself seemed to invite her own victimization, even by the reader: we are placed in the position of the "peanut-crunching crowd" in "Lady Lazarus" who "Shoves in to see/ Them

unwrap me hand and foot—*I* The big strip tease."[4] In approaching Plath's life and art, the reader thus may find it unusually difficult to maintain a balance between sympathy and criticism, and it is even harder to separate her psychic reality from objective truth.

The central event in Sylvia Plath's life was the traumatic death of her father in 1940 when she was eight years old. Otto Plath was a Professor of Entomology at Boston University and an authority on bumblebees, on which he had written a well-known textbook. Born in Grabow, Germany, he emigrated to the United States when he was 16 and entered a Lutheran seminary in Wisconsin. Growing disenchanted with religion, he left the seminary and decided to pursue a teaching career. He met Aurelia Schober in 1929, when she was a graduate student at Boston University. She was surprised when he told her that he had married 14 years ago, that he and his wife had separated, and that he had not seen her for 13 years. After securing a divorce, Plath married Aurelia in 1932. Sylvia was born nine months later and a brother, Warren, followed in 1935. Otto Plath began to fail ill shortly after the birth of his son. He was ill for years before he was diagnosed as suffering from diabetes mellitus. The tragedy was that the condition could have been controlled if treated promptly, but because of a morbid fear of cancer from which he thought he was suffering, Plath had refused to consult a physician until it was too late. After examining him and concluding that an amputation of a gangrenous leg was necessary, the surgeon murmured to Mrs. Plath:

"How could such a brilliant man be so stupid." His condition continued to deteriorate after the amputation. Immediately after his death Sylvia presented her mother with a paper on which was written: "I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN. Signed:_____" (*Letters Home,* p. 25). The mother signed the note at once and never did remarry.[5]

But why would a child require that her mother promise never to remarry unless the marriage was so perfect that it could never be duplicated —or so troubled that the child did not wish to have another father like the one who passed away? Otto Plath remains an enigmatic and contradictory figure to us. He was evidently a loving and devoted husband and father, respected by his colleagues, and hardly the monstrous Nazi his daughter mythologized in "Daddy." Indeed, he was a confirmed pacifist in his political views. Nevertheless, despite the generally admiring portrait of him that emerges from the introduction to *Letters Home,* Mrs. Plath allows herself to express a few quiet criticisms of her husband and their marriage. There were authoritarian aspects of his temperament that his wife and family had to appease. A trained English teacher, Mrs. Plath had to yield after marriage to her husband's wish for her to become a fulltime homemaker. Professor Plath's preoccupation with the book he was writing demanded absolute control and order in their small apartment. "The seventy-plus reference books were arranged on top of the long sideboard; the dining table became his desk. No paper or book was to be moved!" During their first year of

married life everything had to be "given up for *THE BOOK.* After Sylvia was born, it was *THE CHAPTER"* (pp. 12-13). He became increasingly rigid and authoritarian.[6] "Despite the fact that he was only sixteen when he arrived in the United States, the Germanic theory that the man should be *der Herr des Hauses* (head of the house) persisted, contrary to Otto's earlier claims that the then modern aim of 'fifty-fifty' appealed to him" (p. 13). Realizing that, if she wanted a peaceful home, she would have to become "more submissive," even though it was not her nature to be so, the wife reluctantly yielded to his attitude of "rightful dominance."

It was against this background of a stoical mother anxious to keep the peace and an increasingly ill father unable to adapt to a more democratic society that Sylvia Plath spent the earliest and most crucial years of her life. There was never a time when the children's father was not ill, and consequently the family had to adjust its behavior. ". . . it was heartbreaking to watch a once-handsome, powerfully built man lose his vigor and deteriorate physically and emotionally. Appealing to him to get medical diagnosis and help only brought on explosive outbursts of anger." To protect her husband and children from each other, Mrs. Plath had to create an "upstairs-downstairs" household, "partly so their noisy play and squabbling would not upset him, but mostly so that he would not frighten them, for he now occasionally suffered intense cramping spasms in his leg muscles, which would cause him to moan in pain" (p. 18).

Given the intolerable situation, Sylvia must have felt a multitude of tangled emotions: love, hate, rage, confusion, guilt. The distinguished father whom she loved was also the fearful and violent man who, in refusing to call in a physician after years of terrible suffering, in effect killed himself and forever ended the family's security and well-being. The omnipotent Germanic father, author of *Bumblebees and Their Ways,* succumbed to a gangrenous infection brought on by accidentally stubbing his toe against the base of his bureau, stung to death, as it were, by his own carelessness. No wonder his daughter's faith was shattered. Upon learning of his death, Sylvia said: "I'll never speak to God again!" It was as if her father and God were mysteriously fused together and lost forever. The man she could not understand in life she began to mythologize in death. In her poems she could not decide whether to kill him again, as in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," or to dig up his bones, as in "Full Fathom Five," "Electra on Azalea Path," and 'The Colossus." The father's suffering infected die entire family.

After her father's death, Sylvia began to develop a lifelong tendency toward sinusitis, one of the father's physical symptoms, and during the last two years of his life Mrs. Plath developed a duodenal ulcer, which Sylvia analyzed in her journals as a Victorian woman's fear of her husband.[7]

Unable to direct her rage and feelings of abandonment toward the absent father, Sylvia lashed out at her long-suffering mother. But the

explosion was delayed, triggered only years afterwards, as the perplexed mother implies in the following incident in *Letters Home.* Because an autopsy had been performed on her husband's body, Mrs. Plath decided not to allow the young children to attend the funeral. "What I intended as an exercise in courage for the sake of my children was interpreted years later by my daughter as indifference. 'My mother never had time to mourn my father's death' " (p. 25). The scene is dramatized in *The Bell Jar,* though with a more sinister interpretation of the mother's point of view. Characteristically, the differing accounts of the mother-daughter relationship can hardly be reconciled.

Indeed, Mrs. Plath remains as enigmatic as her husband and certainly more instrumental in the formation of her daughter's character. In *Letters Home* she speaks briefly about her father's catastrophic business losses in the 1920s as a result of unwise stock-market investments. Consequently, "my father, broken in spirit and blaming himself most unjustly for his very human error, handed over the reins of management to my mother to the extent that my five-years-younger sister and my thirteen-years-younger brother grew up in a matriarchy" (p. 3). The daughter who grew up in a matriarchy later was forced to be both mother and father to her children after the death of her husband, who also made a human—and catastrophic—error. Mrs. Plath's comments about herself in *Letters Home* reflect a strong and determined personality concealed behind a quiet, restrained exterior. Sylvia's feelings

toward her were obviously complicated by the fact that Otto Plath was old enough to be Aurelia's father (Mrs. Plath was 21 years younger than her husband, who was only four years younger than her own father).[8] In marrying her husband, Mrs. Plath may have been searching for a strong father figure to replace her own father, "broken in spirit"—a pattern that was certainly true of Sylvia's relationship to *her* husband, Ted Hughes. The biographical evidence suggests a compulsion to repeat a condition here. In this instance, it is an unconscious reenactment of painful marriages. In relating how uncritical Sylvia was of her during her high-school years, Mrs. Plath repeats a remark made by her 15-year-old daughter: "When I am a mother I want to bring up my children just as you have us." Mrs. Plath then adds parenthetically, "This charitable attitude, however, was not to last, and I was vividly reminded of my own hypercritical judgment of my parents throughout *my* undergraduate years at college!" (p. 37). In being disappointed first by her father and then by her husband, Mrs. Plath would almost inevitably feel hypercritical to men; and Sylvia shared this attitude, for she too was deeply hurt first by her father, whose death she interpreted as an act of abandonment, and then by her husband, who walked out on her and their two small children in late 1962, just months before she took her own life. History thus seemed to be repeating itself for both mother and daughter, a fact which must have terrified Sylvia, who resented her mother's self-sacrificial life.

But when does self-sacrificial behavior become self-destructive? This was perhaps the central question Sylvia Plath grappled with throughout her life. The enormity of her split between the "good" and "bad" mother is astonishingly dramatized in her correspondence and journals, respectively, which reveal her contradictory feelings toward the major figure in her life. In the hundreds of letters she wrote to her mother, there is scarcely a word of criticism much less hypercriticism. We see only the "good" daughter dutifully writing to the "good" mother. The only hint of criticism appears in a paragraph written to her brother in May 1953, three months before her suicide attempt. The paragraph begins innocuously enough but soon becomes ominous in its implications:

> One thing I hope is that you will make your own breakfasts in the a.m. so mother won't have to lift a finger. That is the main thing that seems to bother her. You know, as I do, and it is a frightening thing, that mother would actually Kill herself for us if we calmly accepted all she wanted to do for us. She is an abnormally altruistic person, and I have realized lately that we have to fight against her selflessness as we would fight against a deadly disease *(Letters Home,* p. 112).

Only by labeling the mother "abnormally altruistic" can the daughter allow herself to criticize her. And yet behind the over-idealization lie hostility and a thinly veiled threat. Whatever truth there may have been in Sylvia's perception of a self-destructive mother, she is speaking about herself in encoded form. For it is Sylvia who will soon attempt suicide as an act of defiance against an impossibly demanding mother whose image of perfection

the daughter cannot possibly satisfy. In the letter, however, Sylvia places the responsibility for this "suicide" on her brother, whose self-indulgence she imagines as the cause of the mother's death. A few pages later in *Letters Home,* Mrs. Plath chillingly reports how one morning during the fateful summer of 1953 she noticed partly healed gashes on her daughter's legs. "Upon my horrified questioning, she replied, 'I just wanted to see if I had the guts!" Sylvia's next words are crucial. "Oh, Mother, the world is so rotten! I want to die! *Let's* die together!" (p. 124). In her imagination, one suicide inevitably led to two.

Sylvia's ideas concerning suicide are confirmed in her journals. The quarrel with her mother was based on the belief that Mrs. Plath's "selfless love" prevented the gratification of the daughter's healthy wishes—ambition, pride, sex, power. Selfless love became associated with domesticity, childbearing, poverty, submission—in other words, the fate of being a woman in a rigidly male-dominated society. Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sylvia Plath equated maternal love with self-denial, self-sacrifice, and ultimately self-destruction, and it is no coincidence that their writings are filled with matricidal and infanticidal imagery. In reacting against their own mothers, they were, of course, rejecting their own unhappy childhoods in which they had both lost a father. And yet one of the ironies Sylvia could not or would not see was that, after her father's death, the mother was thrust into the position of being both the "nurturer" and the "provider"—and that this duel role

required strength, courage, and determination. The situation would seem to suggest that Sylvia's mother had, through necessity, overcome the obstacles that prevented most mothers from also having careers outside the family during the 1950s. Yet Sylvia's anger toward her mother increased in later years.

Paradoxically, Sylvia's anger derived from the fear that her mother was not too weak but too strong—controlling, smothering, omnipotent. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* leads to the conclusion that Sylvia's intense self-hatred originated from a deeply repressed rage toward a rejecting mother, and that the mother-daughter symbiotic relationship prevented Sylvia from developing inner boundaries between self and other, resulting in a lack of identity. As early as 1950 or 1951 (the beginning of the published journals), we see evidence of the theme of fusion with the maternal object which, psychoanalysts tell us, reflects the child's failure to enter the necessary separation and individuation stage of personality development, a stage which occurs when the child is between 18 months and three years old.[9] Speaking about herself in the third person, Plath writes: "But with your father dead, you leaned abnormally to the 'humanities' personality of your mother. And you were frightened when you heard yourself stop talking and felt the echo of her voice, as if she had spoken in you, as if you weren't quite you, but were growing and continuing in her wake, and as if her expressions were growing and emanating from your face" *(The Journals,* p. 26). It is as if the child is

merely a narcissistic extension of her mother. Threatened by the lack of identity and autonomy, the child cannot live apart from her mother—but she cannot permanently live with her mother, since the child's personality is devoured (her space violated). As the child grows up, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the symbiotic relationship. Rebellion—as Plath describes in *The Bell Jar*—may prove unsuccessful in effecting the desired separation. Since the embattled self has a tenuous existence in a symbiotic relationship, its own annihilation may imply the destruction of the maternal love object—the fusion of suicide and matricide. This possibility is darkly hinted at in a July 1953 journal entry, just weeks before Sylvia's suicide attempt. "You saw visions of yourself in a straightjacket, and a drain on the family, murdering your mother in actuality, killing the edifice of love and respect built up over the years in the hearts of other people" (p. 87). This is the last entry before her breakdown; there is then a gap of two years in the journals, which is, unfortunately, the period of greatest interest to readers of *The Bell Jar.*

Only years later, in the late 1950s, does Plath begin to write about her "murderous self." "Its biggest weapon," she realizes, "is and has been the image of myself as a perfect success: in writing, teaching and living" (p. 176). The driving compulsion behind Plath's life and art was the quest for perfection that would mask an insecure and deficient self-image. At the center of the problem was the need to free herself from her mother, as the editor of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* observes. "They had a symbiotic, deeply

supportive union of great complexity in which it may not always have been easy to feel a separate person, an individual self. . ." (p. 265). The material that follows in the published journals, which Mrs. Plath acknowledges, in a brief note, was extremely painful for her to release, betrays an unrelenting assault on the symbiotic mother-daughter relationship. Despite the fact that, in the editor's words, "some of the more devastating comments" have been omitted from publication, the comments are devastating enough in their attack on the bad mother.[10] In addition, the reader frequently confronts "omissions" indicating the Editor's deletion of even more scathing material that has been censored out of the text, presumably to protect the survivors of the story.[11]

Throughout her journals, we see Sylvia's point of view, with its inevitable subjective coloring and often solipsistic thinking; there is one remarkable moment, however, when she reports on her *mother's* dream. The entry is dated December 12,1958, die beginning of approximately six months of analysis with the psychiatrist who had originally treated her in the fall of 1953. Here is the mother's dream, as narrated by Sylvia in third person:

> It was her daughter's fault partly. She had a dream: her daughter was all gaudy-dressed about to go out and be a chorus girl, a prostitute too, probably. [Omission] The husband, brought alive in dream to relive the curse of his old angers, slammed out of the house in rage that the daughter was going to be a chorus girl. The poor Mother runs along the sand beach, her feet sinking in the sand of life, her money bag open and the money and coins falling into the sand, turning to sand. The father had driven, in a fury, to spite her, off the road bridge and was floating dead, face down and bloated, in the slosh of ocean water by the pillars of the country club.

> Everybody was looking down from the pier at them. Everyone knew everything (*The Journals,* pp. 268-269).

Dream interpretation is notoriously risky and fraught with difficulty, and it is hard enough to analyze the diarist's (or patient's) dream. But how do we interpret the mother's dream, which is filtered to us through the memory of the patient? We cannot even be sure that this is indeed the mother's dream, although two other details corroborate this: in Plath's poem "Electra on Azalea Path," written in 1959, she elaborates on the father's death, saying "My mother dreamed you face down in the sea."[12] In a later entry in the journals (December 27, 1958), Sylvia returns to her mother's dream and offers an extended analysis.

To understand the dream, we would need to have the dreamer's free associations, which we do not have here; yet, we do have Sylvia's associations and analytic commentary, and with these we can begin to decode the meaning. Moreover, since we are dealing with a symbiotic relationship, we should not be surprised to find a merging of identities. Sylvia's interpretation, arising from a session with her psychiatrist, emphasizes the fear that her mother holds her responsible for Otto Plath's death. "I have lost a father and his love early; feel angry at her because of this and feel she feels I killed him (her dream about me being a chorus girl and his driving off and drowning himself' *(The Journals,* p. 279). It is the Freudian theory of the omnipotence of thought, the irrational belief that unconscious wishes, in this case the

daughter's repressed aggression toward her father, may actually cause a person's death. If the object of these murderous thoughts does indeed die, the child is overwhelmed with guilt and may accuse herself of being responsible for the death. Sylvia's interpretation of the dream explores the ambivalent feelings both the mother and daughter harbor toward the husband-father, whose memory continues to terrify both women nearly two decades after his death. Each woman seems to hold the other responsible for his death. On the same day she records her mother's dream, Sylvia writes: "He was an ogre. But I miss him. He was old, but she married an old man to be my father. It was her fault. [Omission.]" (p. 268). Interestingly, in the mother's dream it is the daughter, with her shameless seductiveness, who is responsible for Otto Plath's death. The Oedipal element is striking: The daughter's sexuality inflames the father and drives him to madness and suicide. The mother futilely attempts to placate the wrathful husband but her own sexual enticement, the empty money bag, is contemptuously rejected. The dream ends with the husband-father drowning himself in his own rage and the mother sinking into oblivion. The last two sentences convey the deepening horror of public disclosure of the family tragedy, a fear that may also disguise the wish for public vindication.[13]

If the woman in the dream is the mother running desperately to rescue her husband and daughter from a fatal collision, the dreamer is also the daughter searching frantically for lost innocence and youth. Sylvia's dreams

during this time reflect the quest for parental love and approval. "I dreamed often of losing her," she writes about her mother in the December 27, 1958 journal entry, and she also dreams of losing a husband who inescapably reminds her of her father. Her unhealthy dependency on Ted Hughes, to whom she subordinated her literary and professional aspirations, repeats her mother's submission to Otto Plath. Sylvia's dreams return obsessively to the symbiotic relationship of a mother and daughter, and, in a variation on the theme, she imagines herself giving birth to her mother. "Magical fear Mother will become a child, my child: an old hag child" (p. 287). During her first pregnancy, when she expected to give birth to a boy, she dreamed that her father had come to life again and that her mother was also having a son. "This son of mine is a twin to her son," the bewildered Sylvia writes in October 1959; "The uncle of an age with his nephew. My brother of an age with my child. Oh, the tangles of that old bed" (p. 325).

Like Kafka's intensely moving *Letter to His Father,* these sections of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* record the efforts to sort out the most wrenching emotions a child can feel toward a parent and to effect a reconciliation with her mother. In confessing to her inadequacies and fears, Sylvia drops the masks to reveal her most closely guarded secrets. She also wins the reader's respect and sympathy, for there is none of the facile self-praise that mars *Letters Home* or the mask of innocence disguising subtle malice that characterizes her persona in *The Bell Jar.* No one can read her journals

without feeling the horror and loneliness of her life. And yet her journals are not unrelentingly bleak. To acknowledge the depths of her rage seemed to be liberating to her, and, however painful her self-analysis was, it also provided her with relief from her suffering. "Have been happier this week than for six months," she says at the beginning of her therapy. "It is as if R.B. [her psychiatrist], saying 'I give you permission to hate your mother,' also said, 'I give you permission to be happy.' Why the connection? Is it dangerous to be happy?" (p. 276). We overhear her brooding repeatedly over the link between her suicidal despair and defective mothering. "WHAT DO I EXPECT BY 'LOVE' FROM HER? WHAT IS IT I DONT GET THAT MAKES ME CRY? I think I have always felt she uses me as an extension of herself; that when I commit suicide, or try to, it is a 'shame' to her, an accusation: which it was, of course. An accusation that her love was defective" (p. 281). She refers to reading Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and discovering an exact description of her suicidal feelings and the reasons for her writer's block: "a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the 'vampire' metaphor Freud uses, 'draining the ego': that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch" (p. 280). The way to escape her depression, she realizes, is to refuse to allow her mother to control her life. How is this done? 'Talking and becoming aware of what is what and studying it is a help."

The person with whom Sylvia Plath did die most talking, and with the

greatest therapeutic results, was the sympathetic female psychiatrist she first began to see during the end of 1953. *Letters Home* offers a few glimpses of her initial experience with psychiatrists prior to her breakdown. In her mother's words, "The first psychiatrist unfortunately reminded Sylvia of a handsome but opinionated date she felt she had 'outgrown,' and did not inspire her with confidence" (p. 124). He was presumably the source of "Dr. Gordon" in *The Bell Jar,* whom Esther immediately detests because he fails to conform to her image of a kind and omniscient father figure. He prescribes a series of electroshock treatments that Esther experiences as an electrocution. Another psychiatrist prescribed sleeping tablets, which Mrs. Plath carefully locked in a steel case. On August 24, 1953 Sylvia ingested about 40 pills and buried herself beneath the crawl space of her mother's house in Wellesley, Massachusetts. On the third day of her disappearance, Mrs. Plath and her son heard a moaning and discovered the unconscious woman. Like Lazarus, with whom she closely identified, she seemed to be resurrected after three days near death. After spending two weeks at the Newton-Wellesley Hospital, she was transferred to the psychiatric wing of the Massachusetts General Hospital for an additional two weeks and then sent to the renowned McLean Hospital in Belmont, where she responded well to psychotherapy. She received insulin therapy, as well as another series of shock treatments, and then entrusted herself to the psychiatrist in whose faith she never wavered.

An element of mystery has surrounded the sympathetic female

psychiatrist who treated Plath. Called "Dr. B." in *Letters Home,* Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar,* and "Dr. Ruth Jones" (a pseudonym) in Edward Butscher's biography, she soon became the good mother for whom Sylvia was always searching. The references to her in *Letters Home* abound with praise. "I do love her," Sylvia writes to her mother in 1954, "she is such a delightful woman, and I feel that I am learning so much from her" (p. 140). In a letter beginning "Dearest of Mothers," Sylvia writes in 1956: "My whole session with Dr. B. is responsible for making me a rich, well-balanced, humorous, easy-going person, with a joy in the daily life . . ." (p. 215). In *Letters Home,* it is true, Sylvia told her mother only what Mrs. Plath wanted to hear, and consequently her reliability is always suspect. Nevertheless, there is no reason to question her unfailing praise of her loving psychiatrist. She tells her mother how her excellent tutor at Cambridge University, Dr. Dorothy Krook, is going to become her "mentor in the poetic and philosophic realm just as Dr. B. is in the personal and psychological" (p. 255). She also speaks about dedicating her first book of poems to her psychiatrist. This is the last reference to her therapist in *Letters Home,* though at the end of the volume Mrs. Plath adds that during the months preceding her daughter's death, Sylvia had received supportive letters from her beloved Dr. B.

The publication of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* has given us a great deal more information about Sylvia's treatment with her psychiatrist and the relationship between the creative and therapeutic process. The editor reveals

that perhaps the most important element of Plath's recovery in 1953 was her relationship to Dr. Ruth Beuscher, "an extraordinary therapist who played an important role in Plath's life, both at the time and for years afterward" (p. 88).[14] Without telling her mother or husband (whom she had married in June 1956), Sylvia had returned to therapy in December 1958. The effect was dramatic. "It gave rise to her first major work several months later: 'Poem for a Birthday' " (p. 266). About 40 pages of the journals, covering the period from December 1958 to late May or early June 1959, document her responses to her sessions with Dr. Beuscher and the working through of her feelings toward her family and herself. This section of her journals, preceded by Mrs. Plath's explanatory note authorizing the release of the highly personal—and painful—material, begins with Sylvia's determination to make the most out of her analysis. "If I am going to pay money for her time & brain as if I were going to a supervision in life & emotions & what to do with both, I am going to work like hell, question, probe sludge & crap & allow myself to get the most out of it" (p. 266). Frequency of treatment was about once a week, and the fee was $5 an hour—"Enough, considerable for me. Yet not outrageous, so it is punishment" (p. 286). Since Plath did not tell her mother or husband that she was entering therapy again, we may assume she feared their disapproval; consequently, an element of secrecy may have surrounded the analysis. Therapy lasted until around June, when she and her husband went on a three-month tour of the United States, followed by her stay at Yaddo, the writer's

retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York. There is no clear indication in the journals when or why Sylvia ended therapy, or her final evaluation of its effect on her.

So far as we can tell, Dr. Beuscher has never publicly commented upon or written about her clinical experiences with Sylvia Plath—medical confidentiality would have made this unlikely. Unlike Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's treatment of Joanne Greenberg, which the German-born psychiatrist wrote about, in disguised form, in her two medical texts, Dr. Beuscher has refrained from publishing any material on her famous patient. From *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* we learn only her present name—Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse. A glance at the *American Psychiatric Association Biographical Directory* supplies us with background information and her psychiatric orientation.[15] Born in France in 1923, she received her medical degree from Columbia University in 1950 and did her psychiatric residence at McLean Hospital from 1953 to 1955. Plath thus must have been one of her first patients, and only nine years younger than her psychiatrist. In 1959 she was appointed clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, a position she has held until recently. A deeply religious woman, she received a Th.M. in Spiritual Direction from Weston College of Theology. Her articles have appeared in theological as well as psychoanalytic journals. In 1976 she coedited *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality,* and in 1977 she published *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion*, a book that

demonstrates her sensitive and enlightened approach to controversial social issues.[16] Although she apparently did not study at a psychoanalytic institute, her orientation is psychoanalytic, more Jungian than Freudian, and her writings reveal an extraordinary synthesis of religious, psychoanalytic, and feminist insights.[17]

It is clear from the journals that during Sylvia's second period of treatment with Dr. Beuscher, she was beginning to make major breakthroughs, intellectual and emotional, in her self-understanding. Contrary to inferences based upon *Letters Home* and *The Bell Jar,* she was beginning to dislodge the masks she had worn all her life.[18] Few aspects of her personality went unexamined. She was able to trace back the writer's block from which she was suffering at this time to her ambivalence toward her mother, whose love and approval seemed to be contingent upon success. In a crucial passage in the journals, the psychiatrist's voice merges into the patient's as Sylvia probes her inability to write:

> Dr. B.: You are trying to do two mutually incompatible things this year, 1) spite your mother. 2) write. To spite your mother, you don't write because you feel you have to give the stories to her, or that she will appropriate them. (As I was afraid of having her around to appropriate my baby, because I didn't want it to be hers.) So I can't write. And I hate her because my not writing plays into her hands and argues that she is right, I was foolish not to teach, or do something secure, when what I have renounced security for is nonexistent (p. 280).

Sylvia's analysis dramatically freed her from writer's block, and many of

the poems she wrote during 1959 were better than anything she had yet written. Several of these poems—"Electra on Azalea Path," "The Beekeeper's Daughter," "Man in Black," "The Colossus," and "Poem for a Birthday"—are filled with the same anguished familial themes that she was working through in her analysis. Ironically, many of her best poems reflect the image of the artist as a "bad" daughter who expresses rage toward mother and father. In this way, Sylvia could use the creative process to extricate herself from the dilemma that was causing her writer's block. She could spite her mother by writing about her—using her art, that is, to reject the rejecting mother. This would enable die poet to achieve die success that would both conform to, yet defy, the mother's perfectionist standards.

There were also breakthroughs in her understanding of men. During her analysis she visited her father's grave, presumably for the first time, and felt tempted "to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead" (p. 299). He was dead, yet she resurrected and mythologized him in her poems. Her recognition of the "Electra" complex came from this time, and, while it may be argued that this was not a real insight but a flirtation with one of the clichés of a post-Freudian era, she began to examine the meaning of her often-seductive behavior toward men and traced it back to the wish to regain her lost father. She also began to explore her ambivalence toward men and, despite the fact that she was a physically attractive woman, her poor body image.[19] Identifying women with weakness, passivity, and incompleteness, she

yearned to be a man, so that she could merge with his strength and freedom. Her dreams, though, were often preoccupied with images of deformity, mutilation, and death, reflective of her fear of fragmentation. In one of her most-poignant journal entries, she asks: "If I really think I killed and castrated my father may all my dreams of deformed and tortured people be my guilty visions of him or fears of punishment for me? And how to lay them? To stop them operating through the rest of my life?" (p. 301). Castration fear is a particularly strong motif in her writings and may derive from biological, psychological, and cultural sources. The sexism of the 1950s was no less oppressive than that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's era, and the cult of domesticity made it difficult for many women to achieve self-fulfillment and wholeness. Otto Plath himself embodied the belief in male supremacy, and his own disfigurement and death may have seemed a fitting end to some of his more authoritarian ideas.

By current standards, where psychoanalysis usually lasts for many years, Plath made remarkable therapeutic progress in a short time. Almost immediately upon reentering analysis, she began to question nearly every aspect of her life. To judge from her journals, she was, characteristically, a "perfect" patient. Rather than seeking merely symptomatic relief, she accepted the challenge to discover the root causes of her conflicts and to heal herself through insight, change, and growth. The image of psychotherapy we see in the journals evokes the slow but steady process of self-discovery and

the controlled regression to childhood experiences. There are revelations and blinding flashes of insight, to be sure, but they are earned, hard won. The insights are often followed by days of darkness and despair. Progress in psychotherapy is measured not by magical purgation and rebirth, as *The Bell Jar* curiously dramatizes, but by the agonizingly slow development of ego strengths: the ability to tolerate frustration and imperfection, the renunciation of pathological modes of gratification, the capacity for reality testing and problem solving. There was an intense intellectual struggle without "intellectualizing," the separation of ideas from dangerous emotions, and she was going through what her psychiatrist elsewhere called a "corrective emotional experience," which is generally played out in the transference relationship.[20] She was investigating not only the Oedipal components of her personality, such as her competition with men, but the more significant pre-Oedipal issues of separation and individuation, breaking out of the symbiotic union with the mother. There were, of course, areas she did not adequately explore, and her psychiatrist raised two questions that, in retrospect, Sylvia failed to work through: her feelings toward her husband and children. When asked by Dr. Beuscher whether she would "have the guts" to admit she made the wrong choice in a husband, she replied: "nothing in me gets scared or worried at this question" (p. 270). And to the question whether pregnancy would bring her peace of mind, she remained uncharacteristically silent, able only to paraphrase the analyst's thought. "I would, she says,

probably have a depression after my first baby if I didn't get rid of it now . . ." (p. 291). Both questions proved to be more complicated than Sylvia suspected.

The journals also confirm Sylvia's positive transference relationship with her psychiatrist and the need to create a healthier symbiotic fusion with the therapist than she was able to achieve with her mother. At one point she parenthetically refers to the growing erotic love for Dr. Beuscher: "am very ashamed to tell her of immediate jealousies—the result of my extraprofessional fondness for her, which has inhibited me" (pp. 304-305). This was an indication, perhaps, of latent homosexual love. In light of the early death of her father and the fact that she grew up in a house dominated by strong women, this is certainly not unexpected. What is surprising, though, is that Esther's "evil-Double" in *The Bell Jar,* Joan Gilling, is a lesbian, and the novel betrays a strong aversion to homosexual love. Esther is repelled by Joan's sexual advances, and there is only one moment in the story which offsets the pattern of homophobia. When Esther asks Dr. Nolan "What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" the psychiatrist succinctly answers: "Tenderness." The suicide of Esther's alter ego at the end of the story symbolizes the repudiation of the novelist's homosexual and suicidal impulses.[21]

Contrary to the impression given by *The Bell Jar,* however, the journals

reveal a passionate need for womanly love, and Dr. Beuscher was able to accept Sylvia's ardent admiration. Warm, supportive, empathic, the psychiatrist functioned as a Kohutian mirror by receiving and reflecting back the patient's idealizing transference. Sylvia's initial judgment of her at the beginning of therapy never wavers. "I believe in R.B. because she is a clever woman who knows her business & I admire her. She is for me 'a permissive mother figure.' I can tell her anything, and she won't turn a hair or scold or withhold her listening, which is a pleasant substitute for love" (pp. *266-267).* The therapist listened, interpreted, but did not tell the patient what to do. Dr. Beuscher's management of Plath was apparently free from any disturbing countertransference or attempts to disrupt the therapeutic frame through excessive closeness or distance.[22] There is no condescending dismissal of the patient's complaints, as in 'The Yellow Wallpaper," nor incestuous acting out, as in *Tender Is the Night,* nor a glorified death wish, as in *The Cocktail Party.* The psychiatrist was able to handle the patient's negative transference when it arose and analyze it.[23] At one point, for example, Sylvia writes about her anger when the psychiatrist changed an appointment. "She does it and is symbolically withholding herself, breaking a 'promise,' like Mother not loving me, breaking her 'promise' of being a loving mother each time I speak to her or talk to her" (p. 277). There is also a nightmare preceding one of her visits to the psychiatrist in which Sylvia fears the doctor will lock her out or pretend not to be at home. Within a short time, though, she was able to understand

much of this negative transference and control it. She worked through her anger so that when the therapist was late for a session, the patient did not feel threatened. She talks about her "hunger" for the psychiatrist's praise and the magical power of her therapeutic art. Her desire to study psychology and pursue a Ph.D. in clinical psychology was an effort to incorporate Dr. Beuscher's omnipotence. In the psychiatrist's words, "You are never the same afterwards: it is a Pandora's box: nothing is simple anymore" (p. 281).

The Pandora's box of psychoanalysis enabled Plath to overcome her writer's block and to begin to make the imaginative leaps that were to secure her artistic fame. With the help of Dr. Beuscher, she was able to affirm the therapeutic impulse behind her art. "If writing is not an outlet, what is? . . ." (p. 292). There were times, of course, when she questioned the value of psychotherapy and whether her psychiatrist could help her to write or, equally important, help her to write well. Psychotherapy cannot improve the quality of art nor tell us much about aesthetics, why *Hamlet* succeeds while other plays dealing with the Oedipus complex fail. Freud's own conclusion —"Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms"[24] —reminds us of the limits of psychoanalysis to explain the forever mysterious creative process. Yet far from endorsing the view that literature and psychotherapy must necessarily remain antithetical to each other, as so many writers have maintained in the mistaken belief that therapy destroys creativity, Plath remained indebted to her psychiatric experiences and

profited from them. In affirming that "Writing is my health" (p. 327), she recognized that both the creative and therapeutic process allowed her to express her volatile emotions and to achieve a degree of mastery over them. In the end her strength and determination failed, and she succumbed to indescribable horror; yet, even toward the end of her life, she remained hopeful that artistic expression would be therapeutic. She told a friend that *The Bell Jar* was "an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past."[25] The exorcism ultimately failed to rescue her from the bell-jar vision, but the novel does offer us an insight into the writer's illness and the extent to which both her conflicts and defenses shaped the texture of her art.

Rather than arbitrarily divorcing Sylvia Plath's art from her life, as many critics have done in an attempt to make her into a "mythic" writer, can we discover a meaning to Esther Greenwood's breakdown in *The Bell Jar* that would be consistent with our increased understanding of Plath's biography and also help to explain the novelist's conscious and unconscious fictional strategies in the story?[26] The interpretation would not imply that *The Bell Jar* is an example of pathological art—by definition art cannot be pathological—but that it reflects, like Eliot's *The Cocktail Party,* the signs of an individual struggling against psychic fragmentation and the restitutive efforts toward health and wholeness. Both *The Cocktail Party* and *The Bell Jar* are products of a creative malady, a striking confirmation of how, in Eliot's words, "some

forms of illness are extremely favorable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition." But what is the nature of this illness, its origins and dynamics, and the literary choices to which it gives rise?

* * *

Neither *Letters Home* nor *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* offers a diagnostic category of the writer's illness beyond a few vague references to "depression."[27] A more contemporary interpretation would suggest "pathological narcissism." The subject of narcissism, as we discussed in *The Cocktail Party,* remains highly controversial even within analytic circles. It is important to distinguish healthy narcissism (which Freud called primary narcissism, the infant's oneness with the world), from pathological narcissism, a secondary process in which the individual seeks to gain in later life the genuine love that was lacking in childhood. Not all analysts accept the classification of pathological narcissism. Heinz Kohut rejects the term and constructs an alternate explanation based on developmental arrests.[28] The theory will almost certainly undergo major revision in the future. Psychiatric classification is notoriously subjective, culturally determined, and shifting. It represents at best a working hypothesis or useful fiction for the understanding and treatment of mental disorders. Few literary critics are sympathetic to the idea of diagnosing a fictional character or placing him on

the analyst's couch. A novel as undisguisedly autobiographical as *The Bell Jar,* however, may justify a clinical approach. Moreover, it is hardly possible to explore the novel without an understanding of Esther's conflicts and defenses. The work of Dr. Otto Kernberg, a leading theoretician in the area of pathological narcissism, has a striking relevance to Plath's novel. In its presentation of Esther's distorted internalized object relationships, the genetic-dynamic features of her breakdown, and the novelist's adoption of fictional strategies based upon primitive defense mechanisms, such as merging and splitting, *The Bell Jar* reveals a remarkably accurate portrait of a phenomenon that has far-reaching literary, cultural, and psychiatric implications. What follows is first a summary of Kernberg's discussion of the narcissistic personality and then the application of this theory to *The Bell Jar.*

In *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (1975), Kernberg characterizes patients with a narcissistic personality structure as presenting "an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions with other people, a great need to be loved and admired by others, and a curious apparent contradiction between a very inflated concept of themselves and an inordinate need for tribute from others."[29] Other features include a shallow emotional life, an inability to empathize with others, a restlessness or boredom with life, and an excessive need to envy or idealize other people. To an extent, everyone has suffered from these problems from time to time, and there is probably no one who has escaped narcissistic injury. What

distinguishes the narcissist, clinically, is the degree and duration of these injuries. The need to idealize is inseparably related to the impulse to devalue. The narcissist usually turns against those people whom he formerly idealized, because they failed to supply him with sufficient admiration. There is thus a tension between overvaluation and devaluation. One is elevated to a pedestal only to be cast off later. Grandiosity, self-centeredness, and emotional coldness characterize the narcissist, who attempts to control and possess other people in an exploitative or parasitic manner. The narcissist's haughty and grandiose behavior is a defense against paranoid traits related to the projection of inner rage, which is central to his pathology. Both the narcissist and the borderline personality, another category of patients, present similar defensive organization, including a reliance upon splitting, denial, projective identification, and omnipotence. Unlike the borderline patient, the narcissist usually functions well in society because he can control impulses better, mask rage, and sublimate. But this may lead to a vicious circle. The narcissist's success allows him to receive the admiration from others which, in turn, only heightens his grandiosity. For this reason, the prognosis for treatment remains guarded.

How does pathological narcissism arise? Kernberg offers an object relations approach based on the work of earlier theorists, most notably, Edith Jacobson.[30] In the early stages of normal development, there is a differentiation between self and object images, leading to the formation of

identity. Severe frustrations with early objects, however, especially disruptions in the mother-child bond, may bring about a dangerous refusion of self and object images, resulting in identity diffusion—the loss of ego boundaries.[31] In contrast to other psychoanalytic theoreticians, Kernberg proposes that a process of refusion of the internalized self and object images takes place in the narcissistic personality. The ideal (or perfect) self, ideal object, and actual object merge together as a defense against intolerable reality, with a devaluation and destruction of all other inner and outer objects that are less than perfect. Identity is thus created around what Kohut, the proponent of the other major approach to narcissism, calls the "grandiose self," an inflated self-image which comes into existence as a protection against cold or rejecting parents. Kernberg observes that "chronically cold parental figures with covert but intense aggression" contribute to the development of pathological narcissism. These parents, especially the mother, function well on the surface but nevertheless demonstrate callousness, indifference, or nonverbalized aggression toward the child. To protect himself against this intense aggression and deprivation, the child retreats into himself and creates a grandiose self in defiance of reality.

In time, the narcissist becomes entrapped in his delusions of grandiosity, and his suffering increases. Rejected, he cannot prevent himself from rejecting. Because he cannot tolerate weakness or imperfection, he rejects other people as "mere mortals." He cannot genuinely love or establish

warm relationships. The terrible irony is that behind the narcissist's self-love lies the absence of love, just as behind his grandiosity lies self-contempt. The grandiose self may be overwhelmed, resulting in a psychotic breakdown—blurring of ego boundaries, loss of the ability to test reality, regression to more infantile modes of behavior. Feelings of self-hatred, arising from a punitive and accusatory superego, may drive him to suicide. Superego function remains poor, according to Kernberg, because it contains derivatives of primitive, aggressive, and distorted parental images. Unlike other analysts (including Freud), who maintain that narcissistic patients do not form transference relationships, Kernberg argues that they do, but of a special type. "What appears as distance and uninvolvement on the surface is underneath an active process of devaluation, depreciation, and spoiling. The undoing of this transference resistance typically brings about intense paranoid developments, suspiciousness, hatred, and envy" (pp. 247-248). Indeed, one of the narcissist's central problems is the inability to tolerate aggression. He perceives other people as lifeless, shadowy persecutors who are endowed with sinister powers. To deal with his own virulent aggression, he adopts primitive splitting defenses, such as projective identification, in which he projects his rage upon others with whom he then actively identifies. His attitude toward others, Kernberg says, is "either deprecatory—he has extracted all he needs and tosses them aside—or fearful—others may attack, exploit, and force him to submit to them" (p. 233).

Not only does *The Bell Jar* accurately portray the major elements of Kernberg's theory of the narcissistic personality, the story dramatizes one of the most paradoxical features of narcissism, the widening gulf between the achievement of success and perfection, on the one hand, and loneliness and despair, on the other. As a narrator Esther succeeds in conveying the horror of her collapse and the depletion of her spirit. However, as an interpreter of her thoughts and feelings, she usually remains silent, making it difficult for us to determine the extent of her knowledge of herself, both before and after her breakdown. Indeed, narrative distance remains problematic in *The Bell Jar* and, unlike the introspective journals, it is often hard to locate Plath's attitude toward her narrator.

Until her breakdown during the summer of 1953, Esther has led an exemplary life. She speaks proudly about her successful career and the envy it has engendered in others. She describes a life of ferocious competition where only the very best can attain the American Dream. "All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me" (p. 34). The ambiguity of "working like mad" becomes increasingly ominous, as does the hint of aggression in the words "nobody could stop me." Nobody could stop her, that is, except herself. Inextricably, she begins to break down, to drop out, to punish herself for an unspecified crime. Her only explanation is that she

has worked too hard and has not known when to stop—a "nonexplanation."[32] Whereas she had always looked down on her mother's coed college, filled with people who could not get scholarships to the prestigious eastern schools, now she believes that the "stupidest person at my mother's college knew more than I did" (p. 140). The condescending reference to her mother's college, and thus to the mother herself, alerts us to Esther's perfectionist standards as well as her tendency to perceive life in terms of success or failure.

Esther candidly acknowledges her former "perfect" character (or, in Kernberg's language, the grandiose self) but she never reaches a more disquieting insight, her devaluation of others. Readers of *The Bell Jar* may be persuaded to accept Esther's harsh judgment of the world, and the novel powerfully satirizes American society of the 1950s, with its woman haters, "baby-making" machines, and McCarthyist hysteria. The glittering artificiality of the Amazon Hotel in New York, where Esther and the other magazine contest winners are staying, becomes a metaphor of a wasteland culture. Like *The Catcher in the Rye,* to which it remains indebted, *The Bell Jar* exposes the phoniness, superficiality, and corruption of adult society.

The world of sanity seems more terrifying than the world of madness, and when the bell jar descends upon Esther, it is difficult to tell how if at all the world has changed to her. But there is a problem with the novel's

persistent devaluation of the world. As we suggested about Eliot's depiction of reality in *The Cocktail Party,* the reader begins to mistrust the consistently acidic portraits of human nature. Nearly everyone seems pathological to Esther, and she condemns others for faults within herself. She criticizes women for being fashion conscious, for example, but her own descriptions of people begin and end with their physical appearance. Often she makes value judgments on the basis of what she perceives to be their deformed body image. Her characterization of a woman giving birth evokes the image of Gothic horror. She accuses Buddy Willard of hypocrisy, his mother of puritanical fanaticism, his father of abandonment. She feels no gratitude toward her literary patron, Philomena Guinea, who later provides her with the funds for a private psychiatric hospital. Those whom Esther does not deprecate, like Betsy, are "innocent," as if they are not part of human nature. Characters speak "mercilessly" or with a "brutal promptitude." They "hiss," a recurring verb. A nurse "affirmed with relish" the news that Esther and the others are suffering from food poisoning. Facial expressions betray sinister meaning. Buddy has a "queer, satisfied expression" on his face when he tells her that she has broken her leg in a skiing accident. And the nurses walk around the hospital with "conspiratorial grins."

Certainly no one would deny that the world can be and often is an evil place, yet it is equally obvious that sincerity and compassion also exist, often alongside cruelty. Rarely does Esther acknowledge the good within people.

Her world is dark and fearful, and human nature seems as corrupt as the contaminated food she eats. Part of the bell-jar vision is the hypercriticism that prevents her from discovering the unique joys in life, joys that are as real as sorrow. The depth of her cynicism reflects the grimness of her vision. She cannot imagine a man and woman in love without the relationship becoming exploitative or parasitic. She cannot understand how people might freely choose to have a baby and experience pleasure from it. She cannot contemplate love without feeling hate or think about work without becoming competitive. Nor can she pursue experience without having it become poisonous and dead. Attuned to the false self, she denies the possibility of a true self. Every attempt at friendship leads back to a solipsistic point of view. People look good only from a distance, but the moment they approach Esther notices their flaws. When men come close to her, they "sink into ordinariness." She sees reality as shadow without substance and, like the characters in *The Cocktail Party,* she is always on the verge of fragmentation and decomposition. Her tenuous identity dissolves when she looks into a mirror. "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (p. n).

Esther remains on the surface passive throughout the novel, more sinned at than sinning. Like so many heroes and heroines who have experienced psychological breakdowns, she appears Christ-like in her suffering and more sensitive than those who have never broken down. And

yet beneath her mask of innocence lies virulent aggression directed, appropriately enough, at her parents.[33] Replaying her journals, Plath recreates in *The Bell Jar* a mother whose "sweet, martyr's smile" conceals a coldness that is eerily reproduced in her daughter's personality, and a father whose premature death becomes the archetype of primeval loss. Kernberg's description of a narcissistic patient's mother accurately characterizes Mrs. Greenwood. She is practical, efficient, hardworking, but also nonverbally spiteful. Plath allows us to feel little sympathy for Mrs. Greenwood despite the terrible loss *she* has suffered and her years of bitterness. "My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen" (pp. 42-43). Both mother and daughter feel anger toward the man whose death is perceived as an act of abandonment, even betrayal.

Even before his death, however, the marriage appeared lifeless and loveless. Mrs. Greenwood confides to Esther the fact that no sooner were they married and on their honeymoon than her husband casually informed her that they could "stop pretending and be ourselves" (p. 94). From that day on her mother never enjoyed a minute's peace. Despite the affection a man may show to his wife, he secretly wants her to "flatten out underneath his feet." All the marriages in *The Bell Jar* are deadly and dehumanizing, and Esther's rejection of marriage is clearly a rejection of her parents' union. No

camaraderie exists between mother and daughter, no sympathy born out of mutual suffering. Esther experiences her as harsh and rejecting. Seeing her mother asleep, Esther perceives the pin curls on her head "glittering like a row of little bayonets." She has a fantasy of murdering the sleeping woman. "The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands" (pp. 137-138).

Paradoxically, Esther's central fear, maternal abandonment, is also her wish. In her mind matricide and suicide are fused, and she cannot kill one person without killing two. Additionally, the wish to slay the mother reflects the belief that the mother will slay her. Matricide and infanticide are thus inseparably joined, as in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Chapter Thirteen of *The Bell Jar* opens with a discussion of Ibsen's *Ghosts,* in which a young man discovers he has a brain disease inherited from a syphilitic father. At the end of the play he goes mad, and the mother debates whether to kill him. Esther's preoccupation with the play suggests her identification with the insane victim. She too awaits attack from her mother. While speaking to a sailor, she confesses that she is an orphan, and in the hospital she has a fantasy that her mother and brother will abandon her. Yet, Esther becomes furious when her mother does visit her. Of all the visitors in the hospital, "My mother was the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong. She said she was sure the doctors thought

she had done something wrong because they asked her a lot of questions about my toilet training, and I had been perfectly trained at a very early age and given her no trouble whatsoever" (p. 228).

As in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* we are confronted with the difficulty of verifying the daughter's interpretation of the mother in *The Bell Jar.* Are we dealing with psychic or historical reality? Is Esther's illness responsible for the distorted perception of the mother, or is her self-hate a correct evaluation of the rejecting mother? Who is driving whom crazy? Twice in the novel Esther describes her mother as reproachful: "She looked loving and reproachful, and I wanted her to go away" (p. 194); "My mother's face floated to mind, a pale, reproachful moon . . ." (p. 267). We can dismiss Esther's self-conscious disclosure that she had been perfectly toilet trained at an early age, but it is harder to dismiss the suspicion that the daughter's self-destructive behavior derives from the mother's self-sacrificial personality. One of the technical achievements of *The Bell Jar* is the indefinable hostility surrounding the mother's character. It is as hard for us to locate the problem in the mother-daughter relationship as it is for Esther. Ironically, Mrs. Greenwood's silent reproaches are reproduced with a vengeance in her daughter's personality. The climax of the story occurs when Esther expresses to Dr. Nolan her hatred of her mother. Not even then, however, does Esther realize that her own martyrdom is part of her mother's bitter legacy. Esther remains, tragically, her mother's daughter.

Esther is also her father's daughter. Her feelings toward him are no less contradictory than those toward her mother. Early in the story she refers to her German-speaking father, dead since she was nine, who came from "some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia" (p. 36). The reference to psychopathology links the father and his birthplace to a diseased state of mind, part of her paternal legacy. She rejects both him and his Germanic culture. Significantly, her anger toward him is converted to idealization elsewhere in the story. In the presence of the father surrogate, Constantin, whom Esther tries unsuccessfully to seduce, she asserts that she felt happier than she had been since she was nine years old, "running along the hot white beaches with my father the summer before he died" (p. 82). She is struck by the thought that she was "only purely happy" until his death.

Unlike the journals, there is little suggestion in *The Bell Jar* that the father was an "ogre" or that the daughter may have felt responsible for his death. The joyous image of Esther running along the beach with her father the summer before his death sharply contradicts the mother's terrified dream Sylvia narrates in analysis, which ends with the father's drowning caused in large part by the daughter's gaudy seductiveness. We thus receive a highly selective portrait of the novelist's life, especially in its softened father-daughter relationship. Plath retains the biographical incident in which the daughter visits her father's grave. "I thought it odd that in all the time my father had been buried in this graveyard, none of us had ever visited him" (p.

186). The mother remains the scapegoat. Because Mrs. Greenwood had not allowed Esther and her brother to attend the funeral, the father's death seemed unreal for all these years. "I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave. I had always been my father's favorite, and it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with" (p. 186).

In *The Bell Jar,* then, the theme of family betrayal is central to Esther's illness, with each member of the family hurting and being hurt by the others. The roles of victim and victimizer become hopelessly confused. Mrs. Greenwood's neglect of her husband's grave represents her payment for his years of absence. By being unable to visit her father's grave, Esther in turn has been forbidden to engage in the necessary mourning that will allow her to expiate her guilt and grief over his death. Esther's ambivalence toward him is intense, and there is a telling ambiguity in her "great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect." Until now, the daughter has shut the father from her mind, as the mother seemingly has done. However, because Esther has not been able to talk about her feelings toward him, she has remained unable to integrate the good father with the bad one. Thus, she has mythologized him into an omnipotent Daddy while at the same time reviling his black heart—and her own black heart. Even the verb she uses, "to pay him back," confirms the indebtedness and resentment she feels toward him, the love and hate.

Rather than filling a deep void in her, Esther's discovery of her father's grave intensifies her suicidal urge. Immediately after she visits the grave, she breaks down in tears and then calmly proceeds to bury herself beneath the crawl space of her mother's house.[34] This section of *The Bell Jar* is almost completely autobiographical. Psychoanalytically, the suicide attempt represents an acting out of infantile rage and a desire to merge with the buried father. Plath's description of the self-burial contains sexual imagery, with Esther penetrating and being penetrated by the dark earth. Once buried, she feels her head rise, "like the head of a worm" (p. 192).[35] In attempting suicide, Esther also seems to be incorporating the bad mother. The pre-Oedipal imagery evokes a poisonous breast as Esther swallows the sleeping pills that will destroy her insides. Tier descent into the black earth may also symbolize the Hades like journey into her father's forbidding Germanic roots. The early reference to the "manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia" foreshadows Esther's account of self-burial. She "crouched at the mouth of the darkness, like a troll"; once buried, she regards the eerie silence "as black water." The description of her rescue conjures up the image of a child or animal returning to the mother's body. Esther's helpless cry suggests that the object of her search has been not only the father, who remains unresurrected, but the mother, the most primitive object of the child's quest for oneness and security. For it is the word "mother!" that Esther hears herself instinctively uttering as rescue finally comes.

Esther's suicide attempt thus represents a regression to an infantile state in which the young woman reenacts her primitive longings for fusion with the maternal and paternal love object. Given her rage toward mother and motherhood, however, she remains mistrustful of children. The image of a baby "pickled in a laboratory jar" haunts her imagination, as if the fetus itself is imprisoned in its own bell-jar vision. And indeed Plath's journals and novel both suggest that mental illness arises from unresolved childhood conflicts. Like "The Yellow Wallpaper," which dramatizes a young mother's unsuccessful efforts to escape from the insatiable demands of her baby, *The Bell Jar* portrays babies as fat voracious creatures who drain their mother's strength. Esther devotes an entire paragraph to a description of an issue of *Baby Talk,* containing the feeding of babies; she is repelled by their monstrous appetite. She broods over her aversion toward children and implicitly decides to remain childless. "Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad" (p. 250). Earlier in the story, she says that children make her sick. There are several unintentional ironies here. Although Esther imagines babies as voracious and cannibalistic, she herself seems eternally hungry for nourishment, unable to fill the "profound void of an empty stomach" (p. 86). Her image of a healthy over-nourished baby may represent a denial of her fear of a sick undernourished one. She rightly resents a society in which women are required to choose between a

family or a career, yet during her breakdown she becomes more and more like the child she had feared and thus a drain on her own mother's already depleted resources. Despite statements like "I felt pure and sweet as a new baby" (p. 22) early in the story, Esther does not usually associate childhood experience with purity and sweetness. Rather, children are parasitic to her.

Significantly, Esther cannot avoid returning to her own childhood experiences as *The Bell Jar* relentlessly carries her backward into time. Wherever she goes, she sees an image of her mother. Plummeting down the ski slope, she sees her entire past returning; the disastrous journey ends with a broken leg and the return to her mother. Lying on a hospital bed, she drinks a cup of hot milk given to her by a nurse; Esther tastes the milk luxuriously, "the way a baby tastes its mother" (p. 226). In light of Margaret Mahler's pioneering work in developmental theory and identity formation, the separation and individuation theme in *The Bell Jar* remains distorted and unstable, fluctuating between fusion and loss of ego boundaries, on the one hand, and matricidal and suicidal fantasies, on the other. In a startling authorial slip at the beginning of the story, Esther breaks the chronology to refer to her own baby, but it is impossible to reconcile her coldness toward children with the mature decision to become a mother. In fact, one must turn to the journals, not to the novel, to understand Plath's positive feelings toward motherhood, and her desperation when she was unable to conceive.[36] Yet, Plath never did resolve her ambivalence toward motherhood, and

Esther's disclosure seems totally out of character.

What emerges, then, from a psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Bell Jar* is a portrait of a woman whose narcissistic personality structure originates from a matrix of rigid maternal control and paternal loss. Her underlying struggle against identity diffusion may be traced to pre-Oedipal difficulties of separation and individuation. This is admittedly a dry and perhaps reductive analysis.[37] It does not account for the popularity of the novel, Plath's ability to implicate the reader into Esther's harrowing world. The reader certainly does not have to be "narcissistic" to identify with Esther's feelings of emptiness, self-absorption, and persecution. To judge from the horrified reactions of Plath's family, friends, and teachers upon reading *The Bell Jar,* the reader feels more sympathy toward Esther than the real-life characters felt toward the novelist, whom they accused of distorting reality and betraying their trust. This is the prerogative of the novelist, of course, to shape aesthetic reality and to subordinate biographical details to artistic truths.

Esther's psychological health remains, however, a legitimate subject of inquiry. Her defenses only widen her intrapsychic split; for, even as she rejects grandiosity and perfectionism, she retains a magical belief in the Lazarus myth of rebirth through death, which increases her vulnerability to suicide. Kernberg's discussion of die dangers of a sadistic superego and its sanction of self-aggression is particularly relevant to *The Bell Jar.* "Self-

destruction, originally expressing primitive, pregenital aggression, may become an ego ideal and gratify the patient's sense of omnipotence in that he no longer needs to fear frustration and suffering (suffering is now an enjoyment in itself)" (p. 169). This may explain the orderly manner in which Esther plans her suicide, the methodical efforts to control her feelings and environment. Her refusal to allow herself to feel pain, and her tendency toward dehumanization and de-realization, recall Celia Coplestone in *The Cocktail Party,* with whom Plath closely identifies in her journals. Both vulnerable women seek to merge with an omnipotent object to restore their wounded self-esteem. Celia's struggles culminate in her religious crucifixion and merger with Christ; Esther's breakdown unites her with a more secular healer, Dr. Nolan, whose psychiatric power contains none of the destructive excesses of Eliot's Sir Harcourt-Reilly.

Oddly enough, *The Bell Jar* reveals surprisingly little about Esther's treatment with Dr. Nolan, far less about the psychoanalytic process than Plath records in her journals. In fact, were it not for the journals, it would be impossible to infer the extent of Plath's experience with and understanding of psychotherapy. Dr. Nolan is the only major sympathetic character in *The Bell Jar.* She quickly establishes a loving relationship with Esther and becomes the good mother for whom she has always been searching. The emotional climax of the novel occurs when Esther confesses her repressed hostility toward her mother. " 'I hate her,' I said, and waited for the blow to fall. But Doctor Nolan

only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, 'I suppose you do' " (p. 229). It is an important but by no means sufficient insight into Esther's illness. The other components—the symbiotic relationship with the mother, the blurring of boundaries between the self and objects, the use of primitive defenses, the ambivalence toward the father—remain unanalyzed. It is certainly not necessary for a novelist to be a psychologist, even in a story striving for the authenticity of a psychiatric case study. Nevertheless, *The Bell Jar* might have been a better novel if Plath had transmuted the rich analytic material in her journals into her fiction. Of the four writers we have studied thus far, Plath had the greatest familiarity with modern depth psychology and, unlike Fitzgerald, who went out of his way to research the clinical material for *Tender Is the Night,* Plath already had pages and pages of intensely moving and remarkably insightful journal entries. And certainly other writers were by this time publishing accounts of their own psychotherapy—H. D.'s *Tribute to Freud,* for example.[38]

Dr. Nolan remains a shadowy figure in the novel. Esther's admiration for her suggests, on a transference level, the need to merge with an omnipotent object and to incorporate her magical power. The fictional psychiatrist functions, like her real-life counterpart, as a Kohutian mirror in accepting Esther's idealizing transference and supplying her with the empathic "food" to satisfy her intense object hunger.[39] There is no suggestion that behind Esther's idealization of Dr. Nolan lies primitive rage, as Kernberg's theory of

pathological narcissism would predict. We can only speculate on the reasons for the incomplete portrait of the therapist. In writing *The Bell Jar,* Plath knew that Dr. Beuscher would eventually read the novel; indeed, Plath had considered dedicating a book to the psychiatrist. The novelist may have feared writing anything that would undercut, compromise, or devalue the doctor's identity—fears that did not prevent her, however, from attacking the other real-life characters in the story. But these people were perhaps less vital to her psychological health, and she probably did not want to do anything that would foreclose future sessions with her analyst. The idealized portrait of Dr. Nolan lacks complexity, however, and little of the actual drama of Plath's own psychotherapy appears in *The Bell Jar,* including the valuable therapeutic alliance between the two women.

Curiously, whereas in real life Plath was able to incorporate the psychiatrist's power so that it became part of her own self, in the novel we do not see this healing process. The traditional pattern of psychotherapy, the one-step-forward-two-steps-backward process that occurs in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden,* is missing from *The Bell Jar.* Esther's apparent therapeutic recovery is achieved not through psychotherapy, as we might have expected, but through the destruction of Joan Gilling, her *Doppelgänger.* And it is here that we can best see the confluence of literary and mythic conventions, on the one hand, and unconscious psychological defenses, on the other. Although introduced very late into the novel, Joan occupies a central

position. "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (p. 231). The two women torment each other through their ferocious competition. They strive for Buddy Willard's affection, compete over the severity of their mental illness, and vie for the attention of their female psychiatrists. Both women share the same problems of separation and individuation; Joan is identified with voracious orality. She hovers over Esther "like a large and breathless fruit fly—as if the sweetness of recovery were something she could suck up by mere nearness" (p. 243). The main difference between them, as previously noted, is that Joan is a lesbian. Esther inadvertently attracts the attention of women she fears and mistrusts. ". . . the famous woman poet at my college lived with another woman—a stumpy old Classical scholar with a cropped Dutch cut. And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children someday, she stared at me in horror. 'But what about your *career?'* she had cried" (pp. 247-248). Ironically, Esther does not really wish to have a pack of children—she is as horrified at the idea as the women she criticizes.

Plath's decision to kill off Joan Gilling represents the attempt to resolve two of the most conflicted subjects in her life: suicide and homosexuality. The chronology of events in the novel confirms a link between Esther's initiation into heterosexuality and Joan's death, which speeds Esther's recovery. But there are aesthetic and psychological problems with the suicide. Although the use of the *Doppelgänger* relationship has a long and rich tradition in

literature, dating back to early German Romantics such as E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul Richter, Plath herself had written perceptively elsewhere that reconciliation rather than destruction of mirror images contributes to psychological health. In her excellent Smith College honors undergraduate essay, "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels," she discusses the *Doppelgänger* motif, offers a persuasive psychological explanation, and affirms the duality of human nature. "This reconciliation does not mean a simple or monolithic resolution of conflict, but rather a creative acknowledgment of the fundamental duality of man; it involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves."[40]

Despite this insight, Plath rules out reconciliation between the two mirror images in *The Bell Jar.* We cannot take Joan's character seriously, much less her suicide, and, since she has not been the cause of Esther's breakdown, why should her suicide release Esther from the bell-jar vision? Why, then, did Plath err here? Perhaps because she was also influenced by unconscious motives, namely, her tendency toward projective identification or the projection of aggression onto another individual and then the active identification with the person who has been persecuting her. Analysts view projective identification as a primitive defense against intrapsychic rage and thus less healthy than higher level defenses which seek to strengthen ego functions, such as impulse control and anxiety tolerance. Instead of

witnessing, at the end of *The Bell Jar,* an earned reconciliation between Esther Greenwood and Joan Gilling, the good and bad selves, we see further splitting and disintegration. Contrary to the novelist's intentions, Joan's suicide casts Esther's fate into deeper ambiguity. Plath imagined only two solutions to the problem of insanity, as Murray Schwartz and Christopher Bollas have shown, self-destruction and rebirth.[41] Neither solution represents a realistic understanding of the therapeutic process.

The conclusion to *The Bell Jar* raises additional issues that suggest the extent to which psychological factors influenced artistic decisions. Plath's biographer argues that Joan Gilling's suicide is the "only purely imagined event in the book."[42] If so, the novelist's preoccupation with suicide severely limited her freedom to imagine a more successful ending to the novel. The imagination that created *The Bell Jar* was highly dependent upon a precarious defense system consisting of splitting, projective identification, and merging. Too often, these primitive defenses limited the artistic choices in her fiction. As a result, the novel lacks the inventive power of more mature literary works. Joan's suicide, one could argue, is influenced less by the tradition of the *Doppelgänger* than by the novelist's unconscious defensive strategies—a disturbing idea in its deterministic implications. Ironically, the woman upon whom Plath modeled Joan Gilling did not actually take her own life; in a mocking twist of fate, she became a psychologist.

The tragedy of Sylvia Plath's death is that despite her superficial portrayal of psychotherapy in *The Bell Jar* and the misleading idea that a therapeutic cure derives from the Lazarus motif of rebirth through death, a pattern that works better in ritual and myth than in actual life, her journals affirm a more authentic and heroic struggle for self-understanding and recovery. There is a danger of heroicizing the vision of death that appears in her final poems. The last poem she ever wrote, "Edge," reveals an almost total repudiation of life. Even the poet's children are imagined as dead, coiled like a white serpent at an empty pitcher of milk. One of Plath's most sensitive critics speaks of the perfect transcendence in the poem, the calm and noble death of the tragic heroine.[43] Yet, even at the very end of her life, Plath did not entirely abandon hope of rescue, and her suicide becomes more distressing when we realize that she was not a tragic heroine but a woman fighting desperately for survival. In the last paragraph of the last letter in *Letters Home,* she mentions her renewed efforts to cope with the gloom enveloping her life in England, where she was living with her two small children. One week before her death, she wrote to her mother: "I am going to start seeing a woman doctor, free on the National Health, to whom I've been referred by my very good local doctor, which should help me weather this difficult time" (p. 500). As far as we can tell, even as she planned her suicide, she made attempts to get in Touch with her psychotherapist. Alvarez, the source of much of our knowledge of the last weeks of Plath's life, reports that a few days before her death she had sent a

letter to the doctor requesting an appointment. The therapist's letter was delivered to the wrong address, however, part of a pattern of bad timing and poor luck. When she was found, only moments after she had gassed herself by placing her head in an oven—a bitter parody of maternal domesticity—a note was discovered next to the body, with the words and appropriate phone number: "Please call Dr. _____."[44]

Notes

1 Frances McCullough, ed., *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* (New York: Dial, 1982), pp. 113-114. Hereafter referred to as *Journals.* All references are to this edition.

2 See A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (New York: Bantam, 1973), pp. 3-39.

3 Aurelia Schober Plath, ed., *Letters Home* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 3. All references are to this edition.

4 Ted Hughes, ed., *The Collected Poems,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 245. All references are to this edition.

5 See Plath's *Journals,* p. 269, for her own account of this marriage note.

6 For a brief characterization of Otto Plath, see Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury, 1976). "All those who knew Otto Plath intimately," Butscher writes, "agreed that he was nothing like the Prussian tyrant later projected by his daughter's writing; but in varying degrees they also felt that there was a certain rigidity about him, a stiffness in his behavior and attitudes, which became more pronounced as he grew older" (p. 7). Nancy Hunter Steiner, Plath's roommate at Smith, reports in A *Closer Look at Ariel* (New York: Popular Library, 1973) that she talked freely about her father's death and her reactions to it. " 'He was an autocrat,' she recalled. 'I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him' " (pp. 62-63).

7 In her *Journals* Plath discusses the psychological origin of ulcers, and she implicitly has her mother in mind. "Ulcers: desire for dependency & feeling it is wrong to be dependent: you reject food (mother's milk), dependency, and yet get dependency by being sick: it's the ulcer to blame, not you" (p. 291).

8 Butscher, op. cit., p. 7. Given the closeness of age between Plath's father and maternal grandfather, and the fact that after Otto Plath's death Sylvia's grandparents moved in to live with the Plath family, Frank Schober must have played an important role in the formation of Sylvia's image of men; yet we know very little about him and his influence on her.

9 See Margaret S. Mahler, *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), *Volume 1, Infantile Psychosis,* and Margaret S. Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 197$). Mahler defines the separation and individuation process as the "establishment of a sense of separateness from, and relation to, a world of reality, particularly with regard to the experience of *one's own body* and to the principal representative of the world as the infant experiences it, the *primary love object" (The Psychological Birth of The Human Infant,* p. 3).

10 In the "Foreword" to *The Journals* Ted Hughes remarks that the published journals constitute perhaps a third of the entire content. Two other notebooks survived for a time, continuing Plath's autobiographical account from late 1959 to within three days of her death. Hughes destroyed one of the notebooks because he did not want the children to read their mother's writings. The other notebook, Hughes says, disappeared.

11 The "omissions" are not only present in Plath's journals but, we suspect, in her correspondence as well. In *Letters Home* there is a gap between August 1, 1958 and July 29,1959—a turbulent period for Plath in that it was during this time that she began to acknowledge inner rage, directed mainly toward her parents. The liberation of these feelings also coincided with or was released by the resumption of psychotherapy. There is no indication in *Letters Home* that she was beginning to work through her volatile emotions toward her mother. Indeed, it is remarkable how Plath avoids revealing anything of a disturbing nature to her mother. *Letters Home* remains Plath's greatest fiction, an elaborate mask which expresses only sweetness and loyalty. It is impossible for us to know whether she did indeed write letters filled with accusation and bitterness, which Mrs. Plath understandably withheld from publication, or whether Sylvia was simply unable to acknowledge these feelings in a letter.

12 Hughes, ed., op. cit., p. 117. Actually, "Electra on Azalea Path" is less about the daughter's love for her father than it is about her hate for him. Although the poem ends with the line, "It was my love that did us both to death," the implication is that the daughter's murderous thoughts were responsible for his death (as Plath said in her comments to Nancy Hunter Steiner). Azalea Path, incidentally, was the name of the cemetery path beside which Otto Plath's grave lies in Winthrop, Mass. For a discussion of the various ways in which instincts undergo transformations, see Freud's important essay, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," (1915), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. XIV, pp. 111-140. One of Freud's statements about the ambivalence of love has particular relevance to Plath's convoluted feelings toward her father. "If a love-relation with a given object is broken off, hate not infrequently emerges in its place, so that we get the impression of a transformation of love into hate" (p. 139). Although Freud does not consider the transformation of hate into love, this is what happens during the process of over-idealization. In the same volume of the *Standard Edition* appears another important essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), which Plath read and commented upon in her journals.

13 There are additional elements in the dream that we have not commented upon, ' such as the reference to Mrs. Plath's father in the manifest dream content (Frank Schober worked in various capacities at the Brookline Country Club).

14 Dr. Beuscher's name was first revealed in an editorial comment in *The Collected Poems* (p. 288), though oddly enough the name is misspelled on both occasions. (The name appears as "Beutscher," a cross between Beuscher and Butscher, Plath's biographer. Given Ted Hughes's displeasure with the biography—in *The Journals* there is a reference to the "absence of a good biography" on Plath—his misspelling of the psychiatrist's name may be a "Freudian slip.")

15 *American Psychiatric Association: Biographical Directory of the Fellows and Members* (New York: Bowker, 1977), p. 70.

16 Readers interested in Dr. Barnhouse's publications should begin with Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse and Urban T. Holmes, III, eds., *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality,* (New York: Seabury, 1976), and Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion* (New York: Seabury, 1977). Among her articles are "Sex in Counseling: Some Theoretical Aspects," *Counseling and Values,* Vol. 19, No. 3 (April 1975), pp. 147-154; "The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and Psychoanalytic Therapy: A Comparison," *The Way* (Spring

1975), pp. 74-82; "The Religious Identity of Women," *NICM Journal* (Fall 1976), pp. 7-19; and "Sex Between Patient and Therapist," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (1978), pp. 533-546.

17 Anyone who sees an irresolvable antagonism between religion and psychotherapy—as T. S. Eliot obviously did—should read Dr. Barnhouse's publications. She gracefully puts to rest many of the arguments that continue to be expressed by partisans of one camp or another. Stating that the Christian doctrine of original sin is compatible with the psychoanalytic concept of illness, she makes a statement that Eliot's psychiatrist, Sir Harcourt-Reilly, would do well to heed:

> 'The concept of illness in the psychological and emotional fields should have been used to illuminate the concept of sin, not to replace it. It should have been used to assist us in understanding the dynamics of particular failures, to illuminate the virtue of mercy, to bring wisdom to the delicate processes involved both in penitence and in absolution. But just as the concept of sin was often abused by those who, lost in personal power and pride, wished to dominate and control others while hiding behind a cynical pretense of saving their souls, so the concept of illness is now being abused in parallel ways, and for the same sinful reasons" (Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion,* p. 150).

18 Edward Butscher argues that as a result of Plath's psychiatric treatment in 1953 there were changes, often startling, in her feelings and behavior, but that these changes were "the result of Freudian additions to the mask and did not represent any basic alteration in character" (Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness,* p. 125). This may have been true, but it is clear from her journals that not only were there startling changes in her feelings as a consequence of her second treatment with Dr. Beuscher (which the biographer was not aware of), she was analyzing her masks as well. Whether the half-year analysis was sufficiently long to effect major changes in her life is impossible to say; the fact that she committed suicide five years later does not invalidate the emotional and intellectual gains she made during treatment.

19 On more than one occasion in the journals, Plath expresses a strong aversion to her body and a wish to have been born a man. "Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I

was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity" (*The Journals,* p. 30). There are several interpretations of this wish, and it is unclear whether Freud's controversial theory of penis envy applies here and, if so, whether we are talking about cultural, biological, or psychological factors. Dr. Barnhouse, who sharply disputes Freud's understanding of female psychology, takes an equivocal position on the subject of penis envy. "More than once in my professional career I have toyed with the idea of giving up that concept altogether only to have some woman come into my office and in the very first interview tell me that as a child she desperately wanted to be a boy and the worst frustration of her life was when she finally had to accept the fact that she could not urinate standing up!" (Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion,* p. 69). The psychiatrist concludes that until we live in a culture which values women as much as it values men, it will be impossible to sort out cultural from psychological factors in the formation of female sexuality.

20 ". . . no patient ever gets well because the doctor has figured out what is wrong," Dr. Barnhouse writes. "Patients must learn to *feel differently* about themselves and this can only come about through a corrective emotional experience which is based on the interpersonal transaction between the patient and the therapist" (Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion,* p. 98).

21 For a detailed discussion of the *Doppelganger* relationship between Esther Greenwood and Joan Gilling, see Jeffrey Berman, "Sylvia Plath and the Art of Dying" in Leonard F. Manheim, M. D. Faber, and Harvey L.P. Resnik, eds., *A New Anatomy of Melancholy: Patterns of Self Aggression Among Authors, University of Hartford Studies in Literature,* Vol. 10, Nos. 1, 2, 3 (Fall 1978), pp. 137-155.

22 Butscher asserts, though without citing evidence, that, toward the end of Plath's treatment with Dr. Beuscher in the fall of 1954, their "friendship had developed to the point where they spent most of the hour gossiping about college affairs *''(Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness,* op. cit., p. 137). There is certainly no evidence in *The Journals* that the psychiatrist had violated the ground rules of therapy in the 1958-1959 treatment.

23 The human quality of Plath's psychiatrist is apparent to anyone who reads her publications. In acknowledging the potentially destructive effect of the analyst's countertransference upon the patient, Dr. Barnhouse candidly speaks about the difficulty of maintaining analytic neutrality in certain situations. "For instance, I myself am not able to treat

patients who batter their children. I know intellectually that these people need help, and even what their general problems are likely to be. But the anger and outrage I feel toward anyone who abuses children is so great that I am completely unable to form a therapeutic alliance with them" (Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion,* pp. 98-99).

24 Sigmund Freud, "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1928), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), Vol. XXI, p. 177.

25 Quoted by Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," in *The Bell Jar* (1963; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 293. All references to *The Bell Jar* come from the reprinted edition.

26 Judith Kroll, to cite but one critic, insists in *Chapters in a Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) on a rigorous separation between Plath's art and life. Kroll is certainly correct to separate Plath the serious poet from the writer who has become the unfortunate object of cult popularity. Additionally, Kroll's sensitive literary readings have demonstrated Plath's artistry and unity of vision. Kroll urges an aesthetic detachment, however, that is not only impossible for most readers but also highly questionable in its moral and psychological implications. Art, like life, always involves value judgments, and the suspension of these judgments exacts a human price. To approach Plath mainly as a mythic poet and to minimize the confessional aspects of her work is to see her art as less disturbing than it really is. Such an approach represents, psychoanalytically, the attempt to insulate art from life and thus deny the terrifying reality of Plath's vision. Her art cannot be reduced to a psychiatric case study, as Kroll rightly notes, nor can it be divorced from Plath's inner conflicts, defenses, and adaptive strategies. Plath was a mythic poet, to be sure, but her self-created mythic system was also a product of unconscious fears and fantasies. Childhood experiences give rise to myths which in mm shape adult behavior. The question is not whether the literary critic uses "psychology" but the accuracy of the critic's psychologizings. Kroll observes, for example, that the tension between Plath's false and true selves was "initially determined by her relation to her father" (*Chapters in a Mythology,* op. cit., p. 10); but this contradicts everything we know about developmental psychology, which offers overwhelming proof of the primary influence of the mother in the formation of the child's identity. And when Kroll suggests that "in the case of her mother, the need to exorcise may reflect not a lack but an excess of gratitude" (p. 253), she is contradicting Plath's explicit analysis of her feelings in the journals. There can never be an excess of genuine love; Plath was struggling against love

that was contingent upon success and perfection. The publication of her journals gives us a deeper insight into the formative influences on her art and life, and many of the biographical and literary statements that have been made about Plath will need to be revised, including the mythic assumptions.

27 Edward Butscher refers to Plath's "schizophrenic depression," but there is no evidence that she was schizophrenic in the precise meaning of the term. There apparently were no schizophrenic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations, and no evidence that she broke completely with reality'. Nor was she psychotic. For a different psychoanalytic view from the one I am proposing here, see David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone Press, 1976). Relying upon the British school of psychoanalysis (Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, W. R. D. Fairbairn), Holbrook argues that Plath reveals a schizoid vision of reality. One of the limitations of his approach, however, is that he assumes that Plath had an untroubled relationship with her mother and father, and that consequently her rage toward them had no biographical justification.

28 The two leading theoreticians in the area of narcissism, Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg, both agree on the clinical description of narcissism and on the existence of the "grandiose self," but they disagree on the origins and treatment of the disorder. Kohut maintains that the grandiose self reflects a fixation (or developmental arrest) of an archaic, normal primitive self. Kernberg argues that the grandiose self is a pathological structure, clearly different from normal infantile narcissism. Whereas Kohut believes that the analyst must accept the patient's narcissistic transference to complete a normal process that has been arrested, Kernberg maintains that the analyst must interpret the rage behind the patient's over-idealization. Of the two approaches to narcissism, Kohut's is the more original, Kernberg's the more classical. Despite their sharp disagreements on narcissism, the basic agreement of Kohut and Kernberg on the existence of the grandiose self is what most concerns us here.

29 Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), p. 227. All references come from this edition.

30 See Edith Jacobson, *The Self and the Object World* (New York: International Universities Press, 1964).

31 Others have noticed the theme of identity diffusion in Plath's life and art. In *A Closer Look at Ariel,* Nancy Hunter Steiner remarks on how she had to distance herself from Plath to maintain

her own separate identity. "She referred to me in letters to her mother as her alter ego," Steiner writes, "and often remarked that we presented a mirror image or represented opposite sides of the same coin" (p. 58). David Holbrook quotes Ted Hughes affirming the lack of distance between wife and husband. "There was no rivalry between us . . .in these circumstances you begin to write out of one brain ... we were like two feet of one body . . . A working partnership, all absorbing" (*Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence,* [London: Athlone Press, 1976], p. 119). As Holbrook notes, Plath came to reject this intense identification. Biographical evidence suggests that the symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter was repeated in all her later friendships, and that she both desired and feared this excessive closeness.

32 One of the main differences between the journals and the novel is that in the former we see a more complete portrait of Plath's craving for academic and artistic success, while in the latter Esther implies that she never really believed in the perfectionism she was pursuing. Esther's jaded view of success does not accurately reflect the complexity of Plath's feelings on the subject.

33 In one of her journal entries, Plath chillingly plots a future attack on one of her best friends. "Given time . . . I'll attack her next year and get at her good innards. Innocence my mask" *(The Journals,* p. 186).

34 In *The Journals* Plath describes her visit to her father's grave in 1959, while she is deep in therapy; in *The Bell Jar* Esther's visit to the cemetery immediately precedes her suicide attempt in 1953. The effect of the chronological change is to strengthen the connection between Esther's suicide attempt and the fusion with the father, whereas Plath's suicide attempt in 1953 may have more directly involved pre-Oedipal issues of separation from the mother.

35 Worm imagery in Plath's poetry often contains phallic symbolism. In "Daddy" the speaker defiantly rejects both her father and husband, proclaiming: "The black telephone's off at the root,/ The voices just can't worm through"; in "Lady Lazarus" she compares her suicide attempt to a withdrawal into a seashell: "They had to call and call/ And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls."

36 See *The Journals* (p. 312) for Plath's fear of infertility. "If I could not have children—and if I do not ovulate how can I?—How can they make me?—I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body. Intercourse would be dead, a dead end."

37 See Frederick Crews, *Out of My System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), for a useful distinction between reductive and reductionistic approaches to literature. A reductive approach, he suggests, may divert "attention from the text to something that purportedly lies behind the text and helps to explain it"; a reductive interpretation may be "possibly quite justifiable and helpful" (p. 169). In general, however, Crews—who has been sympathetic to psychoanalytic literary criticism in the past—now takes a dim view of it, dismissing most of it as reductionistic.

38 H. D., *Tribute to Freud* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974). Although there is no evidence that Plath read this book, there are interesting similarities between *Tribute to Freud* and *The Bell Jar,* including the central metaphor. "There was ... a second globe or bell-jar rising as if it were from my feet. I was enclosed. I felt I was safe but seeing things as through water" (H. D., *Tribute to Freud,* p. 130). Compare this to Esther's statement in *The Bell Jar:* 'To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (p. 267). H. D.'s psychoanalysis with Freud freed her from writer's block and made possible a burst of literary productivity. There are other similarities which, however coincidental, are worth noting. A character named Hilda (H. D.'s first name) appears in *The Bell Jar,* and in *Tribute to Freud* a figure called Joan seizes H. D.'s personal belongings in a way that anticipates Joan Gilling's symbolic appropriation of Esther Greenwood's personality.

39 David Holbrook argues that Dr. Nolan "is even more sinister than Dr. Gordon: she coerces in such a *nice* way" (*Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence,* op. cit., p. 102), but this is a misreading. Far from being a "petrifier," the female psychiatrist befriends Esther and helps to restore her trust in others.

40 Quoted by Butscher, op. cit., p. 159.

41 Murray M. Schwartz and Christopher Bollas, "The Absence at the Center: Sylvia Plath and Suicide," *Criticism,* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 147-172. Reprinted in Gary Lane, ed., *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp-179-202.

42 Butscher, op. cit., p. 308.

43 Kroll, op. cit., p. 148.

44 In *The Savage God* Alvarez gives the impression that Plath was doomed by the intensity of her art, and that she was resigned to suicide. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although Alvarez is correct when he says that artistic creation is not always therapeutic (he maintains, in fact, the opposite view: that art increases the vulnerability of certain writers to suicide), he fails to acknowledge the extent to which Plath's writing contributed to her psychic health. So too does he fail to appreciate Plath's indebtedness to her psychiatrist. "Having been bitten once by American psychiatry," he writes, "she hesitated for some time before writing for an appointment" with another psychotherapist in England (p. 32). As *The Journals* eloquently makes clear, she was not "bitten" by psychiatry but helped in ways that we are only now beginning to appreciate.

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