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Poetic Visions: Figures of Sight and Feminine Subjectivity in the Works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

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Abstract

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By Colleen C. Dunne

Although Sylvia Plath stands as an iconic figure for the emergence of the feminine lyric voice in 20th century American poetry, the popular interpretation of this voice as a "confessional" one has misrepresented the significance of her work by framing it largely within the confines of biographical studies. This focus has camouflaged an important aspect of Plath's poetry, namely, how it stages the crisis attendant to the figuration of the feminine lyric voice. Plath's work operates within what I've identified as a culturally dominant "script for seeing," a detached gaze that assumes a masculine "I/eye" and a feminine object. As a result, the feminine "subject," that appears in Plath's work is one which can't claim a lyric voice – it is muted and artificial, a victim of the objectification of the script her poems stage. Plath's work does not merely re-enact this script; it also comments upon it, exposing its violence and cruelty through hyperbolic theatricality. Plath's dramatic staging of this crisis which haunts the birth of feminine lyric subjectivity shapes and invites new and vital forms of poetic dialogue, examples of which can be found in the works of two contemporary women poets, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Anne Carson. Albeit in different ways, both poets open up new possibilities for conceptualizing feminine subjectivity by revising the kind of "script for sight" that dominates Plath's lyric voice. Anne Carson's subject resists the de-humanization of Plath's theatrical self-presentation by moving "offstage" into the margins where meaning cannot be seen but must be read. Although Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's work, like Carson's, seeks to disempower visual objectification, it does this not by undermining the link between language and perception, but rather by expanding and complicating that connection. Her work carves a space for feminine subjectivity without separating itself from the realm of representation, locating latent possibility and "interiority" within outward forms. In their poetic engagement with notions of vision and subjectivity, both Anne Carson and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge elude the traps of feminine representation embodied in Plath's work and open up new possibilities for figuring the feminine lyric voice.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Scripts for Femininity and Scripts for Seeing

In an analysis of images that date from 16th Century Oil Painting to present-day media representations of women, John Berger's Ways of Seeing identifies an historically entrenched script for seeing in Western culture that affects our notions of gender: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at**"** (47). In a world increasingly dominated by visual culture, this assertion merits examination. How might the divide between seeing subject and viewed object shape and determine our notions of gender? Moreover, if woman is assigned to the role of object, how can one assert a feminine "I" as grammatical subject? This thesis will explore these questions not within the confines of visual culture, itself, but within the realm of poetry. How does poetry enter into or open up this script for seeing? How can it reflect upon, pervert, create or recreate notions of feminine identity by engaging, obstructing, or rewriting what it means "to see"? My ultimate concern is how certain poems might challenge or rewrite notions of what constitutes a feminine subject: what it means to see and "be seen" as a woman and how this changes with poetic revisions to vision itself**.**

The launching point for this investigation of feminine lyric subjectivity will be the work of Sylvia Plath. Although Sylvia Plath stands as an iconic figure for the emergence of the feminine lyric voice in 20th century American poetry, the popular interpretation of this voice as a "confessional" one has misrepresented the importance of her work by framing it largely within the confines of psychological and biographical studies. This focus has camouflaged an important aspect of Plath's poetry, namely, the crisis attendant to the figuration of the feminine lyric voice. Plath's poetry operates within what I've

identified as the culturally dominant "script for seeing," a detached gaze that assumes a masculine "I/eye" and a feminine object. As a result, the feminine "subject" that appears most frequently in Plath's work is one which can't claim a lyric voice – it is muted and artificial, a victim of the objectification of the script her poems stage. However, in repeating this script, Plath's work does not merely re-enact the script; it also comments upon it, exposing its violence and cruelty through theatrical hyperbole. Her dramatic staging of this crisis that haunts the birth of feminine lyric subjectivity will shape and invite vital new forms of poetic dialogue and engagement as we can see in the works of two contemporary American women poets, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Anne Carson. Albeit in different ways, both poets attempt to open up new possibilities for conceptualizing feminine subjectivity by revising the kind of "script for sight" that dominates Plath's lyric voice.

1.2 Poetry, Vision, and the Feminine Subject

How does the scriptorial model for sight play out in the realm of poetry? How does "self" emerge in a poem and how is sight involved? How does this gendering script identified in visual culture complicate the appearance of a feminine subject who thinks, emotes, senses, and acts in poetry? I would argue that the construction of the "I" in lyric poetry is not unlike the construction of the "eye" and that it, too, can succumb to the conventions of gendering scripts. Much of William Carlos William's poetry illustrates these conventions and his poem, "Queen Anne's Lace," provides a paradigmatic example:

> Her body is not so white as
> anemone petals nor so smooth--nor

so remote a thing. It is a field
of the wild carrot taking
the field by force; the grass
does not raise above it.
Here is no question of whiteness,
white as can be, with a purple mole
at the center of each flower.
Each flower is a hand's span
of her whiteness. Wherever
his hand has lain there is
a tiny purple blossom under his touch
to which the fibres of her being
stem one by one, each to its end,
until the whole field is a
white desire, empty, a single stem,
a cluster, flower by flower,
a pious wish to whiteness gone over--
or nothing.

Comparing women to flowers is a trite metaphor but Williams' poem indicates an awareness of this. His poem marks a shift in tradition by paying homage not to the delicate and fragile rose which is cultivated in a garden or hothouse, but rather to a common field flower, a flower which grows in the wild. Williams thereby extols an "accessible" and "real" feminine sexuality, showing that this is just as beautiful if not more beautiful than the remote beauty of virginal untouched purity. However, the poem still adheres to conventional gendered scripts in representing women and women's sexuality, for the eroticism of this poem is derived from a fantasy of male control: the woman appears in the poem only as a response to the male gaze and his touch, a touch which leaves a visible mark. Her role as a seeing, feeling subject -- as one who looks back, or touches back -- does not come into play at all. In fact, without the visible imprint of male desire, the woman cannot and does not exist. She melds into a field of whiteness where no distinct identities can emerge, a field where there is "nothing." "Queen Anne's Lace" illustrates the problems inherent in linking subjectivity with

femininity within this script for seeing: if "woman" can only appear within the context and control of the male gaze, then it is impossible for both femininity and subjectivity to emerge simultaneously, for if she is not seen or marked by male desire, if she is not a viewed object, then she does not exist at all. Williams poem reenacts the kind of script elucidated by John Berger in Ways of Seeing and by Laura Mulvey in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema: the beholder is masculine, the viewed object is feminine. As a viewed object, the woman is placed in a role of silence, a role where she cannot dictate the terms of her own presence or express her own unique experiences. As Mulvey writes "Woman… stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (7).

Crucial to my argument is the premise that there is an intimate connection between the visual and the verbal. In Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought, Martin Jay demonstrates how visual experience is entangled with linguistic constructions. First, Jay demonstrates that the ubiquity of visual metaphors in language is such that one cannot avoid them in common linguistic practice. Although phrases as "point of view" "glance at…" "illuminate" "outlook" may be obvious indications of what Jay terms "ocularcentric discourse," many of these words are so imbedded in language that they escape notice:

> …*Demonstrate* comes from the Latin *monstrare*, to show. *Inspect, prospect, introspect* (and other words like *aspect* or *circumspect*) all derive from the Latin *specere*, to look at or observe. *Speculate* has the

> same root. *Scope* comes from the Latin *scopium*, a translation of a Greek word for to look at or examine. Synopsis is from the Greek word for general view… (1)

Jay elaborates on how he defines the relationship between the visual and the linguistic: it is more complex than one of reference or allusion. According to Jay, visual experience is a cultural and historical phenomenon which is mediated linguistically. Thus, "the universality of visual experience cannot be assumed" and "Observation… means observing the tacit cultural rules of different scopic regimes (9). Jay's argument is important to my thesis in that it demonstrates how vision can be constituted through language and that, therefore, vision, like language is subject to cultural, historical, philosophical, and religious norms.

Elaine Scarry's book, Dreaming by the Book, also investigates the connection between language and vision not within the changing tides of culture and history but, more specifically, within the process of reading. According to Scarry, literature is able to tap into our imagination by reproducing the deep structures of perception, dictating to us (without our awareness) how and what to visualize in the mind's eye.[1] In other words, literature does not just imitate sensory outcomes, it impels us to reconstitute the experience of sensing, itself, "that is the material conditions that made it look, sound, or feel the way it did." (9). Because the instructional quality to literature is rendered so as to be camouflaged to the reader, it appropriates the transparency or unmediated immediacy

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[1] As Scarry writes, "literature consists of a steady stream of erased imperatives" (35) to create mental pictures.

that we attribute to sensory experience. As Scarry writes, "We are given procedures for reproducing the deep structure of perception, and the procedures themselves have an instructional character that duplicates the 'givenness' of perception" (38).

Examining the link between vision and language, one finds that vision doesn't exist outside language; rather, language stages the possibility for vision. This premise is essential to my argument because I am not merely looking at how poetry references or alludes to pre-established ways of seeing. I am looking at how it can revise *how* we see.

1.3 Psychoanalytic Theory: Specularity and Sexual Difference

Although I will not rely extensively psychoanalytic theory much to develop my arguments, it is important to note how psychoanalytic theory forms a backdrop for issues of specularity and sexual difference investigated in this thesis. Traditional psychoanalytic theory, as Laura Mulvey points out, provides a means with which to analyze this gendering script for seeing. Since its advent, psychoanalytic theory has identified vision as playing a crucial role in sexual identity and difference. As Jacqueline Rose writes, "Freud often related the question of sexuality to that of visual representation." (227) In Freudian theory, the turning point in a child's entrance into adult sexuality occurs because of an instance of sight. A child assumes that everyone has the same genital structure until he/she sees that of the opposite sex's. For a male child, witnessing the female sex induces "castration anxiety." The female child, on the other hand, is overtaken with "penis envy." Thus, in Freudian theory, both castration anxiety and penis envy, forces that condition the sexual behavior of both men and women for the rest of their lives, are brought about by this initial act of sight: "… the stress falls on a

problem of seeing. The sexuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer, in the relationship between what is looked at and the developing sexual knowledge of the child" (Rose, Sexuality in the Field of Vision 227).[2]

Lacanian theory brings the role of vision in Freudian psychodynamics into relief. As in Freud, "castration anxiety" is induced by the sight/site of absence; however, Lacan liberates this "absence" from an anatomical or biological context and addresses it as a symbolic one – specifically, the exclusion of feminine sexuality from a phallocentric model:

> Freud argues that the only libido is masculine. Meaning what? other than that a whole field, which is hardly negligible, is thereby ignored. This is the field of all those beings who take on the status of the woman – if, indeed, this being takes on anything whatsoever of her fate. (Lacan, Seminar 20, p. 8)

Just as he makes a distinction between the "other" and the "Other," Lacan makes a distinction between "woman" (small 'w') and "Woman."[3] The signifier, woman (small w) refers to man's alter-ego, an ideal or projection which belongs to the imaginary realm

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[2] Freud identifies this vision as playing an ongoing role in sexual dynamics, noting that visual impressions act as a "frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (Freud 22). "Perversions" can result when the role of vision takes a primary role in sexuality: "…in scopophilia [the pleasure of looking] and exhibitionism the eye corresponds to an erotogenic zone" (Freud 35).

[3] Lacan states that "The Other is not simply the locus in which truth stammers. It deserves to represent that to which woman is fundamentally related… Woman has a relation to the signifier of that Other, insofar as, qua Other, it can but remain forever Other " (Lacan 81).

rather than the real. One could translate "woman" as "woman for man." The woman in William Carlos Williams' poem, "Queen Anne's Lace," in Lacanian terms is "woman" but not "Woman." "Woman" refers to an unrepresentable reality which has its locus neither in the Symbolic nor in the Imaginary: "There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence – I've already risked using that term, so why should I think twice about using it again – she is not-whole" (72-73).

Although examining the phallocentric model for subjectivity and sexuality can explain the absence of "Woman" in mainstream culture (or as Mulvey states, 'advance our understanding of the status quo'), ultimately, psychoanalytic models do not revolutionize or recreate models of subjectivity even if they point out their flaws or cast them in a different light. For example, although Freud identifies fetishism as a perversion, it could also be said that his writing reinscribes fetishism with his dissection of life into zones, body parts, and phases of development,[4] and as a result it is difficult (even impossible) to address new possibilities for vision or for feminine sexuality within this discourse.[5] The intervention of poetry, here is crucial.

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[4] Though it is important to note that in his essay, *Transformations of Puberty*, this organization begins to unravel with the observation that it is possible to "derive a multiplicity of innate sexual constitutions from variety in the development of erotogenic zones" (Freud 71).

[5] Although Lacan liberates these terms from anatomical essentialism, Cixous points out that he merely replaces them with a symbolic essentialism: "Here we encounter the inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect in his old Freudian realm, in the way that, to take the figure back to the point where linguistics is conceptualizing it 'anew,' Lacan preserves it in the sanctuary of the phallus (symbol) 'sheltered' from castration's lack…But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lank, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father" ("Laugh of the Medusa" 85).

It is the language of poetry, Julia Kristeva indicates in her book, Revolution in Poetic Language, which provides the ground for both resistance to and potential refiguration of notions of subjectivity. Kristeva adds a component to Lacan's model of the psyche -- the "semiotic," a stage which precedes and interferes in the symbolic realm, a kind of preter-language that belongs to body and affect. The semiotic is "a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process" (Kristeva, Revolution 28) where language resides in the maternal, material, and kinesthetic mode of "becoming." Kristeva argues that the semiotic chora, as "the place where the subject is both generated and negated" (28), plays an important in role in poetry, especially modern poetry, as it is an area where the codes of subjectivity can be rewritten: "...poetic language puts the subject in process/on trial through a network of marks and semiotic facilitations" (57-58). Kristeva, then, identifies the revolutionary potential poetic language can have in changing or interfering with prescribed notions of subjectivity

My thesis is ultimately concerned with how vision and subjectivity are defined and negotiated in the context of poetry, and how poetry gives shape to a "lyric subject." How can a woman become the lyric subject, the expressive and emoting I/eye, when historically and culturally she represents the addressee, the listener, the implied and mute other? How can a woman speak for and about herself when she is speaking from a position of alterity.

1.4 Figuring Sight and Feminine Subjectivity: Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge

Sylvia Plath is undeniably one of the most well-known and widely published women poets for the latter half of the 20th century. As such, it would seem natural to argue that she stands as a progenitor of the contemporary feminine lyric voice. What's ironic and apropos about Plath's iconicity, however, is that it echoes the predicament elucidated in her poetry: an inability to claim that "voice" as a representable feminine subject. Rather than giving rise to a self which asserts subjectivity, her work simply repeats the script which prevents it from achieving subjectivity, a script which confines femininity to the realm of visual objectification. Indeed, while images of mouths, tongues, lips, and throats may be frequent in Plath's work, it's crucial to note that they always appear in a context where the voice is muted: from the "stony mouth-plugs" of "Medusa," to the "mouth veil" in "Purdah," to the " O-gape of complete despair" in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." What many critics have failed to note in Plath's work, however, is that Plath's work comments upon this script, exposing its violence and cruelty through theatrical hyperbole.

What Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and Anne Carson inherit from Plath's work, then, is not the poetic presence of a feminine lyric voice but the startling absence of one. In their work, both Carson and Berssenbrugge re-engage the Plathian dilemma of figuring a speaking feminine subject within a script that would render her a silent object of contemplation. Although Anne Carson's poetry also comments upon this script it doesn't do so through hyperbolic reenactment but through performative deconstruction. Vision is a central concern in Carson's work and her poetry engages a range of visual media – from television documentaries to Renaissance frescoes. Rather than convey

particular images or pictures, however, her poetry seems to explore how forms, myths, icons, "set the stage" for picturing itself. Carson's lyric subject resists the de-humanization of Plath's theatrical self-presentation by moving "out of the light" into the margins where meaning cannot be seen but must be read – between stories, between translations, between the photographic evidence and documentation. Her work invokes a feminine subjectivity where "seeing" becomes less a matter of perception than a manner of reading.

Vision is also a central concern in Berssenbrugge's work. Like Carson's poetry, her poetry attempts to revise what it means to "see" and "be seen" but rather than frustrating the link between perception and reference, Berssenbrugge's work seems to extend that link and expand upon it. Much of her work seems to embody the characteristic Michael Tod Edgerton applies to her work in his review of "Nest," a "poetics of the interval: "Space – between subjects, bodies, inside and outside, perception and the elusive real – is here pregnant with invisibilities, desire, possibility, and the tension between communal and individual forces." Rather than positioning vision within a construct of beholder and viewed object, Berssenbrugge positions it within the "between," within the conditional and contingent. Berssenbrugge does not denounce representation; she complicates it by investigating the unrepresentable needs, desires, and/or anxieties which engender it. Berssenbrugge's poetry seeks to carve a space for feminine subjectivity not by separating itself from the realm of representation but by locating latent possibility, poeticism, and "inwardness" within an outward form.
The importance of Sylvia Plath's work in the context of these present-day women poets, then, is not that she establishes a particular model or mode for the contemporary feminine

lyric voice; rather that she illuminates the inability to claim a voice as a feminine subject. More than any other form of literature, poetry captures the colors, tones, and the *feel* of language, giving voice to those experiences which remain on the borderline of articulation, which can't be communicated through perfect grammar, logic, or sense, and which can't be true without the texture of the those truths. If Plath's poetry can be considered as a progenitor for the feminine lyric voice it is because it echoes the startling emptiness of that voice within the mode of feminine representation. Plath's poetry reveals the crisis which informs both Carson's and Berssenbrugge's work, and their need to rely upon the revolutionary potential of poetic language to envision a feminine subjectivity which has a voice.

Chapter 2 -- Staging Scripting: Sylvia Plath's Theater of the Self

2.1 Introduction

What is it about Sylvia Plath's poetry that asks us, tempts us, dares us to read a living, breathing body into the text? What gimmicks, what tricks, lure us into rapt attention, so that when the poem is over, what remains is more than a rhyme or a line or an image but an actual person called into being before us, a person who leaves its reader angry, moved, sickened, and/or repulsed? Sylvia Plath's poetry demands more than readers. It demands an audience. The conventions of the book, however, do not automatically clue in *its* "audience" to a framework of "performance" and "play." The book does not include a curtain call: a moment when all the costumed, smiling actors – Othello hand-in-hand with Iago – bow to a clapping audience. The book does not show the contrivance of its setting -- that the sky is painted, that the room is missing some of its walls, and that the furniture are props which stage hands wait in the wings ready to move. Perhaps this is why when the typical reader shuts a book of Sylvia Plath's poetry she does not leave the "actor" behind with the book. Instead, she is left with an impression of a living person -- who may have a character name, "Ariel," "Lady Lazarus" "Beekeeper" "Medusa" -- but who is still easily conflated with the person Sylvia Plath, the person who wrote the book, the person whose diaries and journals document information that corresponds with details in the poetry. It is only the careful reader of a poem who looks for those gestures that might tell her *how* to read it. The careful reader understands that "poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader" (Empson 4). Accessing those assumptions is not a simple task nor is it one that is guaranteed of any "success" -- as William Empson has

written, the "machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry." (Empson 3)[6] As a result, a person's interpretation and assessment of a poem is more likely to speak to her reading habits than to those gestures which would ask her to deviate from them.

The critical tendency to define or characterize Plath through her poetry (or vice-versa) seems to reveal such a dynamic at work – reading according to a particular "habit" – for it is a tendency that has led to startlingly different characterizations of Plath and her oeuvre. The variation of these depictions is such that Jacqueline Rose asks in her book, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, "Would it be going too far to suggest that Plath has generated a form of psychotic criticism?"(14) From critic to critic, Sylvia Plath can be portrayed as a victim or a victimizer, a tragic literary hero or a deranged psychopath. Christina Britzolakis, in her book, Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning, provides a short summary of some of these portraits:

> For David Holbrook, who aligned himself with the tradition of F.R. Leavis, Plath was an apostle of 'nihilism' and 'moral inversion,' her poems 'schizoid' expressions of spiritual emptiness and non-being. Irving Howe, writing from the very tradition of American leftism, condemned the 'morbid' subjectivity, 'free-floating hysteria,' and 'sentimental violence' of Plath's work… Nor has feminist criticism always avoided the trap of

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[6] Empson defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (3).

> diagnosis: of turning Plath… into a martyr and victim, or of turning her writing into a narrative of self-discovery or psychic rebirth… (3-4)

Plath's body of work has often been culturally and critically considered autobiographical or "confessional" because much of it includes personal references or allusions which, if one investigates them, seem to render the poem more explainable. Certain details in the poem "Ariel" ("The brown arc / Of the neck I cannot catch," or "How one we grow,/ Pivot of heels and knees!..."), for instance, make more sense when one learns that "Ariel" was a former horse of Plath's. Likewise, Plath's beekeeping poems acquire a biographical resonance when one learns that Plath's father was an apiologist. Additionally, many of Plath's later poems include an address to or mention of a person in her life. For example, given the first-name of Plath's son and the time at which "Nick and the Candlestick" was written (not long after Nicholas's birth) as well as and the poem's last line ("You are the baby in the barn"), it is not unreasonable to infer that "Nick and the Candlestick" includes a reference to Plath's child Nicholas. The mistake, however, would be to confine the poem to being "about" or "for" Nicholas – to ignore the metaphorical elements which allow the poem to be as pertinent to a public sphere as to a private one since societal constructs of "infant" and "motherhood," particularly Christic ones, loom large in "Nick and the Candlestick." Similarly, "Daddy" includes allusions to Plath's real-life father: Plath's father died from complications during a foot amputation ("…You do not do / Any more black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot"), his first language was German, a language with that Plath herself struggled to learn ("Ich, ich, ich, ich / I could hardly speak. / I thought every German was you"), and he died when Sylvia was ten-years old ("I was ten when they buried you"). However,

these details should not detract from the poem's exploration of patriarchal figuration within a sphere less limited than Plath's own life history.

This is not to say that biographical studies are irrelevant to reading Plath's work. In fact, I would argue that Plath's journals, notes, papers, drafts, etc. can provide potential clues as to *how* to read her work. My argument is that Plath's poetry should not be read to illuminate her biography since this is a reading habit which has been overindulged in the criticism of her work. The type of criticism which conflates Plath with Plath's representations of herself and restricts interpretations of her poems to a biographical scope misses a key component to her work. Representations of self in Plath's work are never whole or harmonious. When critics try to reconcile these fragmented representations into a single biological and historical referent, they are not reading Plath's poetry; they are glossing over these poems and what they have to say. Thus, although much scholarship on Plath's work assumes and/or investigates Plath's biography as an essential element in reading her poetry with the result that the "true" version of Plath's life and death story has been a subject of enormous critical debate, such gestures to exert control over Plath's story, as Jacqueline Rose points out, are more elucidating than any particular version of that story:

> No writer more than Plath has been more clearly hystericised by the worst of a male literary tradition. No writer more than Plath…demonstrates the limits of responding to that tradition, and its barely concealed repulsion, by cleaning up the woman writer, thereby re-repressing one part of what that tradition so fiercely, and with such ceaseless misogyny, expels. (Haunting 28)

Instead of locating "hysteria" within the persona of Plath, Rose finds it instead, within the body of criticism that needs to personify Plath within the poem. Even when critics attempt to remain "objective" or "formalist" in their criticism of Plath's work, it is clear that a biographical context for the poems taints such readings of her work. For example, in the introduction to his critical volume on Sylvia Plath, Harold Bloom tries to avoid this trap by stating that his issues with Plath's poetry are not anti-feminist but specifically aesthetic. He does this by extolling other women poets as he dismisses Plath: "If we compare her to an original and powerful opponent of her own generation, like the superb May Swenson, then she quite dwindles away." (2) What is the aesthetic Plath employs that Bloom finds so distasteful? "Hysterical insanity, whatever its momentary erotic appeal, is not an affect that endures in verse. Poetry relies upon trope and not upon sincerity."(2) In this statement Bloom not only characterizes Plath's aesthetic by using terms that have been historically and culturally employed to invalidate the impressions of women ("hysteria" and "insanity"), but he links this aesthetic to Plath's person with the word "sincerity." First of all, how would Bloom know if Plath's work is sincere or not? It seems he makes this assumption based on the type of biographical construct of Plath that has been made by Anne Stevenson in Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath, a book which regularly conflates the person, Plath, and Plath's poetry. In Bitter Fame, chapter titles are taken from the titles or lines of Plath's poems to describe a psychological "phase" in the poet's life. For example, the chapter "Pursuit 1955-1956" focuses on Plath's initial romantic entanglements with Ted Hughes, and the first two lines of "Pursuit" serve as one of the chapter's epigraphs: "There is a panther stalks me down: / Some day I'll have my death of him." (59) There is no close analysis of the "Pursuit," no

explication of its features or contents beyond a brief interpretation which quickly collapses the poem's importance within Stevenson's narrativized psychodrama for Sylvia Plath's life: "For Hughes, Sylvia…wrote a full-page poem, which she called 'Pursuit,' about 'the dark forces of lust.' What in invoked, in fact, was not so much lust as her own libidinous double, the deep self full of violence and fury she was suppressing under her poised and capable appearance" (78). Stevenson's "biography" makes absolutely no distinction between the psychodrama staged in Plath's poetry and the psychodrama she can only assume to have taken place within Plath's true life. Bloom is making a similar move to Stevenson even if it is concealed by an aesthetic critique. "Sincere," moreover, is a problematic characterization of Plath's poetry, because it overlooks the elements of irony as well as the deliberate exaggeration of performative or staged dimensions in Plath's later work. Relegating the psychodrama to Plath's biological body and not to Plath's body of work invalidates it *as* a body of work. Why is the personality the stage and not the poem, itself? Jacqueline Rose indicates that this kind of assumption disregards a core element to Plath's poetry, "a relentless return in so many different forms to the question of her own subjectivity…that provisional, precarious nature of self-representation which appears so strikingly from the multiple forms in which Plath writes (5)" "Sincere" would also be a problematic adjective for critics Susan Van Dyne and Christina Britzolakis. In Revising Life, Van Dyne argues against "a 'poetics of transparence' in which the woman writer is assumed to be writing directly and authentically from her lived experience." Van Dyne's book examines instead "the proliferation of masks and performances that Plath produced in her poetry…[which] assumes that there is no master narrative of her life or her art" (1). Britzolakis in "Sylvia

Plath and the Theatre of Mourning also examines Plath's work not as conventionally confessional but as "inherently rhetorical and self-reflexive, a structure of exacerbated theatricalism" (7).

Thus, my argument against a *strictly* biographical interpretation of Plath's work is not a new one. It falls in line with a recent trend in criticism of Plath's work which Robin Peel describes in her book Writing Back as a feminist strategy where "gender itself is seen as a social construct or performance (as argued by Judith Butler),[7]" and where "Plath's later work can be seen in part as an acting-out or unraveling of that performance." (21) Unlike Van Dyne, however, I do not think Plath's interrogation of feminine subjectivity finds creative solutions (Van Dyne writes "Plath's habits of self-representation suggest she regarded her life as if it were a text that she could invent and rewrite" (1)) but, rather, finds itself trapped within the conventions of script. Like Rose, I believe that it is not the self but the problem of appearing *as* a self that haunts much of Plath's work; however, unlike, Rose, I'm disinclined to rely primarily on psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity to argue this. As Britzolakis has so brilliantly argued in her book, "[Plath's] self-reflexivity continually complicates and interferes with the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading." According to Britzolakis,"Plath interrogates psychoanalysis at the very moment when it purports to investigate her."(7) I agree completely with Britzolakis' premise that Plath's work takes place on "a number of stages – literary, psychoanalytic, mythic, historical, biographical," (8), and that "the relation it proposes

[7] Peel, here, cites Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity but one could also read Butler's Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' to review her arguments regarding gender as performance.

between author, text, and reader cannot be adequately encompassed by the models of poetic expressivity most commonly brought to bear on Plath's writing." (8) However, given the focus of my thesis, I will focus primarily on a particular stage -- the stage where the self appears to sight as an image or a body.

Plath's work bodies forth the only feminine self that can be seen or identified within the context of an objectifying male gaze. However, Plath's work comments as much upon the fractured notions of self as they do the conventions which produce them. Confessionalism in Plath is more like a theatrical exhibitionism, a hyperbolization of self-representation which mocks the means through which such representation can and must occur. In fact, "constriction" seems to characterize much of Plath's work. As Bruce Bawer notes in his essay, "Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession"[8]

> …Plath's Colossus poems seem more skillful than inspired. They are, as Anne Sexton commented, "all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that)"… almost everything in these verses strikes one as forced, from the intensifying adjectives and adverbs to the patterns of alliteration and assonance." (15)

I believe this aspect of Plath's poetry -- her use of tight, symmetrical stanzas, her excess of alliteration and assonance and her excessive adherence to critical poetic standards of her time – is crucial to understanding what her work is trying to express. By over-adhering to the requirements of "the assignment" (and as Bawer notes, many of Plath's

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8 Although I do not agree with Bawer's argument which echoes Bloom's dismissal of the literary merit of Plath's work, I find some of the details in this essay pertinent to my argument.

poems were "assignments" given to her by Ted Hughes when she could not come up with anything to write about herself (14-15)), she exposes "assignment" in her poetry. More than she is staging a representation of her "self," she is staging the scripting that yields that self, i.e., "If I want to appear to you, this is the form in which I must appear." The kind of address that Plath's poetry enacts often reminds me of the kind of ominous, rebellious statements that children make when they feel they have been overlooked or underestimated: "I will show you!" The assertion begs the question, "What will be shown?" What the child *wants* to show is "I" because it is precisely that which has been neglected, but she can do so only by performing or becoming what is recognizable by "you," in which case is the child really showing "I"? According to my thesis, Plath's poetry does show "I" but it also shows how becoming a recognizable "I" involves the repression and destruction of significant parts of herself. Her work demonstrates how trying to "talk back" from a position of alterity forces the speaker to subject herself and her experiences to a necessary distortion and degradation, a kind of macabre theatricalization. In fact, I would say that Plath's speaker-self is not unlike John Berryman's "Henry," in The Dream Songs, a figure who can only give voice/ song to his "confessions" by appearing in black face and in the context of a minstrel show.

The tragedy of Plath's "theater of the self" is that it shows how the very process of rendering "self" submits identity to a necessary process of violence, a detachment, or disassociation which creates a body that can perform but cannot feel or emote. Her poetry is full of artificial bodies, body parts, bodies injured, undergoing surgery or medical examination. However, Plath's work also stages the process which engender these bodies, foregrounding the violence of self-representation and how it entails a

splitting of the self into "surveyor/surveyed."[9] Plath's work stages the "I" but it also stages the scripting of the "I" -- a writing which reveals less about self than about the estrangement of self and the disengagement or disassociation required to appear and to be recognized.

[9] These terms are borrowed from Berger: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

2.2 The Script for Seeing

Plath's poetry operates within what I've identified as the culturally dominant "script for seeing:" a detached gaze that assumes a masculine "I/eye" and a feminine object. John Berger explains how this script affects the formation of feminine identity:

> To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself…And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman." (46)

This figuration of feminine identity as one that fractures under the influence of surveillance is a recurring element in Plath's poetry. The self doubles in its division and becomes a "we" – a subject and other engaged in a solipsistic struggle. This kind of split subjectivity is featured in Plath's poems "In Plaster" and "Tale of a Tub":

> the stranger in the lavatory mirror
> puts on a public grin, repeats our name
> but scrupulously reflects the usual terror.
> …
> ("Tale of a Tub")

> I shall never get out of this!
> There are two of me now:
> This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
> …
> ("In Plaster")

In both poems, the subject cannot appear as important or real without these doubles. The plaster cast, the "new absolutely white person," takes on a divine status:

> And the white person is certainly the superior one.
> She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
> ("In Plaster")

The bathtub in "Tale of a Tub," similarly takes on the status of truth: providing shape, form, and fact to the movements of the human body under water.

> …under water our limbs waver, faintly green, shuddering away
> from the genuine color of skin; can our dreams
> ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
> the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact
> intrudes even when the revolted eye
> is closed; the tub exists behind our back:
> its glittering surfaces are blank and true.

However, fluid or wavering bodily movements in water may be, Plath does not accord water the ability to transform the human body. If the medium of water here is a figure for the medium of language, then what Plath indicates is that while the linguistic medium can shift or color our access to reality, it cannot ultimately blur "the intransigent lines…/.. that shut us in." The preceding stanza confirms this outlook with its depiction of an "authentic sea" that denies the body "fantastic flesh:"

> Twenty years ago, the familiar tub
> bred an ample batch of omens; but now
> water faucets spawn no danger; each crab
> and octopus -- scrabbling just beyond the view,
> waiting for some accidental break
> in ritual, to strike -- is definitely gone;
> the authentic sea denies them and will pluck
> fantastic flesh down to the honest bone.

Plath's concept of the link between poetic imagery and language, here, parallels that of Ezra Pound in his imagist manifesto. Ezra Pound was the driving force behind the imagist movement in the early 1900s, a poetic movement which identified "images" as its

building blocks. Imagistic language is probably best defined by Pound in his book, ABC of Reading, as words which threw "the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination" (*The ABC of Reading* 63)[10] Like Pound, "Tale of a Tub," insists on a poetics that can provide a transparent link between word and image.

In both "In Plaster," and "Tale of a Tub," the figure of the double/ divided self informs us as to how the lyric subject both appears before us and how she speaks to us. In both poems, the subject can only "speak" through or within the context of a fixed image or structure provided by an artificial form. In "In Plaster," the cast becomes a double that can't be discarded because it frames and supports the feeble flesh:

> I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
> She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp—
> I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,

Like the plaster cast, the tub also represents a shell that cannot be shed. As a fixed object, it represents an accuracy that "must not stalk at large" lest we be set adrift within the sea of our own delusions.

> …accuracy must not stalk at large:
> each day demands we create our whole world over,
> disguising the constant horror in a coat of many-colored fictions…

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[10] The inspiration for locating an imagistic quality within language was Pound's reading of Ernest Fenollosa's "Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" which read Chinese written characters as pictographs and/or ideograms. Pictographs depicted concrete things and ideograms combined pictographs in order to yield abstract ideas. In his *Vorticism* essay, Pound provides the algebraic equivalent for this formula: "One expresses their algebraic relation as a2 + b2 = c2… That is the language of philosophy." (275) Pound's imagism thus yielded a type of poetry which aestheticized laconism. The ideal poem yielded psychological or intellectual meaning through a combination of "neutral" images rather than through explicit address or commentary.

Both "In Plaster" and "Tale of a Tub" indicate that without these divided doublings that represent fixed forms of truth or divinity, the lyric subject cannot speak with any authority or authenticity. However, the poems also reveal the paradox at work within this structure, for the forms which allow the lyric subject to appear before us are the very ones which mute lyric subjectivity. The "intransigent lines" of the tub "draw/ the shape that shuts us in…" and the cast, while "holding my bones in place so they would mend properly" takes on its own will, one contrary to the desires of the flesh:

> …secretly she began to hope I'd die.
> Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,
> And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case
> Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water.
> …
> Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
> Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully.
> ("In Plaster")

"In Plaster" and "Tale of a Tub" are reminders that the lyric "voice" in Plath's poetry belongs to not to the realm of feminine subjectivity but to the realm of feminine representation. The first-person subject in Plath must always be considered in this way – as inevitably disconnected from lyric voice. In Plath's poetry, representing the self involves a scission, cutting or mirroring and it is this resultant partial or disconnected "self" who speaks in her poems. Bodying forth a subject means at the same time a disembodiment of the subject's voice. *Mirror*, another poem which contemplates a divided self, highlights this feature of Plath's figure of the double by assigning first-person speaker status to the mirror and not to the human who looks into it. The mirror not only claims a position of absolute objectivity in the opening lines; it also indicates that its point-of-view consumes any other, that it occupies a position of divinity:

> I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
> Whatever I see I swallow immediately
> Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
> I am not cruel, only truthful –
> The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

What constitutes the "heart" of a mirror is architectural rather than corporal. It reflects upon a wall rather than on human faces (which it deems insignificant interruptions within its visual frame):

> Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
> It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
> I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
> Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

The sovereignty of the mirror image thereby involves a disconnect from what is human. The poetic process in "Mirror" does not embody a speaking subject; it, rather, disembodies a speaking subject. Even when "natural" bodies intervene the human voice remains inaccessible. Although the mirror announces at the beginning of the second stanza, "Now I am a lake," this transition from man-made to "natural" does not provide an alternative medium for identity. The mirror simply re-designates its own change from a four-cornered frame facing a wall, to a reflecting body of water. This body of water is only a substitute for the mechanical function of the mirror, providing representations of "what is" and "how things are." Once again, the medium of representation – language, mirror, water – is unyielding. The words of the poem do not transform what exists in the realm of the visual.

> Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
> Searching my reaches for what she really is.
> Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
> I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

In “Mirror,” the natural is framed by the functional. It is always subsumed by and articulated through representation, so that the distress of the woman who “bends over me,/ Searching my reaches for what she really is” does not affect its purpose or its essential objectivity:

> She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
> I am important to her. She comes and goes.
> Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
> In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
> Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Despite these flirtations with romance in “candles” and “moonlight” the mirror’s position of superiority, its definition of vision and seeing, remains unchallenged. The woman searching “for what she really is” returns to the mirror for self-definition despite the self-contempt it engenders. Although Plath is a master at generating new and interesting metaphors for an object, poems such as “Mirror,” “In Plaster,” and “Tale of the Tub” deny the ability of the metaphor to negotiate what constitutes that object, imagistically, or how it is ultimately seen.

If one considers the articulation of “I” in Plath’s poetry as not belonging to a human subject but to a contrived one, it makes sense that the figure of the mechanical or mechanized human is a recurring one in her work. Bodies are frequently plastic, sculpted, or surgical. They are dolls or mannequins with detachable or attachable limbs:

> …I inhabit
> The wax image of myself, a doll’s body
> (“Poem for a Birthday:” Section 6. “Witch Burning”)

> How her body opens and shuts –
> A Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges!
> (“An Appearance”)

… I
Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
("Fever 103")

The little toy wife –
Erased, sigh, sigh.
Four babies and a cooker!
("Amnesiac")

By presenting a feminine subject in the form of a doll/ mechanical body, such poems designate a voice that belongs less to a human woman than to a manipulable visual object. Rather than becoming a human voice in the course of the poem, the feminine identity remains mired within the realm of unvoiced and voiceless mechanical things. Consider "The Applicant" where the prospective wife is referred to as an "it:"

A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

As a speaking subject/object the doll talks, but the repetition of talk indicates exactly what kind of talk this is: mechanical, mimicry, parroting.

I would suggest that the speaking subject in much of Plath's work, especially her later work, is much like this talking doll. Her poems operate within a regime of visuality that assumes a male seer. Becoming a female subject means becoming, at the same time, an object, and this subject-object only communicate experiences through a programming and parroting. The feminine voice is drowned in the priority of the image. Acquiring a feminine subject-body involves a kind of negotiation in language which ultimately deprives the body of voice. What Plath does for her reader in her poetry is not directly communicate her anger, shame, or grief over lived experiences and emotions. Rather,

she indicates how these traces of anger, shame, and grief belong to a predicament of how to speak as feminine subject.

Plath's poetry seems to agree with Simone de Beauvoir's premise in The Second Sex that "One is not born a woman; but rather becomes a woman." (267) However, her poetry also seems to move from the assumption that this "becoming" happens within a rule-based male-centric visual regime. As Plath writes in one of her earlier poems, "Female Author" (catalogued by Ted Hughes as her "juvenilia"), "All day she plays at chess with the bones of the world." In order to exist as a woman, one must become the corporeal representation of a woman. In order to exist as case a woman *and* author involves a kind of strategizing which weighs loss against gain. It's a type of negotiation much like that described in Plath's poem, "Sculptor"

> To his house the bodiless
> Come to barter endlessly
> Vision, wisdom, for bodies
> Palpable as his, and weighty.
> ("Sculptor")[11]

In a way, what Plath is depicting in her own poetry is her own bartering for a body so that, what we as readers should look for is not what the lyric subject is saying but what the lyric subject is saying about how she can say anything at all.

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[11] Although this poem ends up as a kind of ode to artistic representation, I would argue that there is an insidious thread here which can help us reflect on how Plath depicts subjectivity in her own work.

2.3 Identifying the Script

Plath's later poems, then, delimit a subject who is unable to speak within the paradigm of feminine representation. The script for seeing which brings a feminine subject into "being" disempowers her from the lyrical power of expression. As "A living doll" she can "talk, talk, talk" but this talk does not communicate. It simply parrots. It says what it was instructed to say. Its phraseology belongs to the world of advertisement, media, and consumerism where the female is a commodity; this culture which perpetuates a scripted image of femininity also perpetuates a verbal script where what predominates is not the kind of artistic or linguistic innovation that T.S. Eliot and his formalist cohorts would identify as true poetry.[12] This is not the individual talent readjusting the complicated workings of the tradition of literature. This is the individual accessing the tradition in its most watered-down and accessible form and perpetuating the cliché -- the catch phrase, the jingo, the facile tune or words that will echo and repeat. This is the world of spectacle, of advertising, where the point is not to incite thought or reflection but, rather, to appeal to a consumer, to entertain him/her, and it relies upon pre-made thoughts and cultural biases in order to assure easy absorption.

One must keep in mind that the poetic standards for the time and context in which Sylvia Plath wrote (the mainstream journals, the poems which would win prizes) (Wagner-Martin 84) were decidedly what are now labeled as "formalism" or "new

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[12] "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (Eliot 2207).

criticism." Christina Britzokalis in her book, Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning, notes the reign of this concept of poetry in Plath's literary world:

> By the 1950s, modernist antisentimentality had acquired through the influence of the New Critics, something of the status of an orthodoxy… it is the canonic male modernists Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Lawrence, Stevens, Auden, many of whom were still publishing when Plath began to write…, in addition to older contemporaries such as Roethke, Wilbur, and Lowell, who preside[d] over elite literary culture." (71)

The poems of Auden and Eliot, in particular, according to Martin-Wagner in her book, Plath: A Literary Life, were those which a young writer were "asked to model, to copy." (84) Plath's early work exemplifies this type of effort to conform to the formalist standards of poetic tradition. All of Plath's earliest poems (classified by Ted Hughes in a section titled "Juvenalia," in The Collected Works), are in tight forms – often sonnets or villanelles. Although Plath's poems seem to loosen in their forms after 1956, most of her poems written up to 1958 are written in rhyme and meter (even Tale of a Tub, the poem discussed earlier, is a poem written in iambic pentameter with a regular stanzaic pattern of octets in a ababcdcd rhyme scheme). Nancy D. Hargrove, in her article, "The Poems of 1957," points out that Plath's perseverance with a forms-based poetics is expressed in her journals: "In the summer comments, she indicates a desire to write 'quite elaborate rhymed and alliterative forms without sound like self-conscious poetry, but rather like conversation.'" (61) (quoting Plath, "Letters Home," 373)

Plath's early attempts to mold her words to a particular rhyme scheme, rhythm, or meter, often results in unwieldy and awkward diction. Although Wagner-Martin is

describing a specific poem (Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea") when she writes that "it is.. wordy and convoluted, giving the reader the impression that the work is a puzzle to solve rather than a replica of some spoken communication" (87) and "comes across as a poem written as an exercise, strained into formal locutions…," (88), such descriptions apply to many of Plath's early poetry. For example, consider the stanza below from Plath's 1956 "Wreath for a Bridal," a poem written in four sextets with an ABBACC rhyme in sprung rhythm[13]:

> Couched daylong in cloisters of stinging nettle
> They lie, cut-grass assaulting each separate sense
> With savor; coupled so, pure paragons of constance,
> This pair seek single state from that dual battle.
> Now speak some sacrament to parry scruple
> For wedlock wrought within love's proper chapel.

The "effort" of the poem, "Wreath for a Bridal" is all too apparent. Many of Plath's early poems also reveal blatant efforts to emulate the poetic styles or formalist innovations of other traditional poets. In"Ode for Ted," a poem Plath wrote in 1956, the emulation of Gerard Manley Hopkins' style seems particularly evident. In addition to its use of sprung rhythm (Hopkins' innovation), the poem is marked by an excess of assonance and alliteration and hyphenated portmanteaus, both "trademark" features of Hopkins' work:

> For his least look, scant acres yield:
> each finger-furrowed
> heaves forth stalk, leaf, fruit-nubbed emerald;
> bright grain sprung so rarely

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[13] "Sprung rhythm" means each line has the same number of stressed syllables, but the number of feet is inconsistent; writing in sprung **rhthym** makes it much easier to create a rhythmic "jumping" in the poem – for example, a iamb followed by a spondee followed by a trochee results in a succession of four stressed syllables – and easier to create quickly alternating dynamics in the poem

> he hauls to his will early;
> at his hand's staunch hest, birds build.

Plath's Ariel marks a loosening in her use of poetic forms and diction to the extent that many critics interpreted these stylistic shifts as Plath revealing more of her "true self," or at least as Alicia Ostriker remarks in her article, "The Americanization of Sylvia," a return to her native American diction: "In Ariel, the American language rises gap-toothed from the waves. It is brusque, businesslike, and bitchy. It deflates everything it touches. It grins behind and through the literary language, exploiting it." (103)

However, while the transition from earlier poetry to later poetry reveals a loosening of some of these standards it does so *in conjunction with* a conscious amplification of them. This rhetorical gesture of amplification immediately pushes Plath's speaker into an artificial, theatricalized space, which complicates any interpretation that finds a "true voice" within the poems. Crucial to understanding Plath's poetics of the subject in her later work, then, is this performative context of exaggeration, what Britzokalis notes as a DeManian "conscious inauthenticity:"

> Far from being naively expressive, Plath's later poems are structured by an unstable and theatricalized irony that manifests itself as hyperbole. Not only Electra, Clymenestra, and the other obvious dramatis personae, but all of Plath's speakers participate in a pantomime of what Paul de Man calls 'conscious inauthenticity.' (Britzokalis, 121)

It is also important to keep in mind that the title of Plath's last collection is Ariel, a title which in of itself, leads us to the stage since Ariel is a character in William Shakespeare's play, The Tempest. This is not to say that the sole allusion cast by the name, "Ariel" is a theatrical one. William V. Davis identifies a threefold meaning in Ariel based on his

reading of the collection's title poem. Ariel alludes to the character in Shakespeare's play, The Tempest, and for those who have access to biographical or autobiographical information about poet, "we know from reports about the poet's life, [Ariel] was the name of her favorite horse, on whom she weekly went riding." (176) Davis identifies a third allusion within Ariel that previous to his 1972 article had been overlooked,

> although the poet, apparently, went out of her way to make reference, even obvious reference, to it. I refer to 'Ariel' as the symbolic name for Jerusalem. "Ariel" in Hebrew means "lion of God." She [Plath] begins the second stanza of the poem with the line "God's lioness," which seems to be a direct reference to the Hebrew or Jewish 'Ariel.' (177)

Davis' point is supported by Plath's frequent references to the Holocaust. However, I would like to shift the attention away from religion by adding a fourth allusion to the mix. "Ariel" also recalls one of Plath's earlier poems, "Aerialist," classified by Ted Hughes as Juvenalia and placed in this section in Sylvia Plath: the Collected Poems. "Aerialist" contains what could be viewed as a metaphor for the female poet and her writing: writing poetry is like an exercise in light-wire acrobatics where one's realm of action is so narrowed as to be precarious -- any motion necessitates balance, attentiveness, and skill. (The strategy involved in walking a tightrope, then is not unlike that needed to play "chess with the bones of the world" or to "barter for a body.") "Aerialist," recounts a dream of a tightrope walking performer whose movements are dictated by a whip-cracking maestro

> Nightly, she balances
> Cat-clever on perilous wire
> in a gigantic hall,
> Footing her delicate dances

To whipcrack and roar
Which speak her Maestro's will

The act is enhanced by the interference of obstacles. Adroitness and courage enable the aerialist to stay on the thin wire while "great weights drop all about her/ And commence to swing:"

…the girl
Parries the lunge and menace
Of every pendulum;
By deft duck and twirl
She draws applause...

The allusion in Ariel to "aerialist," then, would point us back to a performative context for Plath's poems, particularly one that is scripted (by a maestro) and meant to incite the audience's applause. Her efforts are twofold: to stay alive/ balanced on the thin wire and to please the crowds by enhancing the precariousness of this. If we look upon "Aerialist" as an allegory for Plath's work, what Plath, then, is describing is her own difficulties in negotiating the formal requirements of poetry, requirements which are bound to a male tradition and dictated by male poets or "maestros." As Gilbert writes in her essay, "In Yeats' House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath,"

Plath was exactly what many of her most expert readers are: a sophisticated student of a twentieth-century literary tradition that was constituted out of an implicit if not explicit battle between highly cultured intellectual men (Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence) and their female counterparts, literary ladies who seemed either to be part of a less cultivated group like the one that Hawthorne called a "damned mob of scribbling women" (Teasdale, Millay, Olive Higgins Prouty) or part of a more cultured but also more dangerous, even presumptuous group that we might call a Black Mass of scrivening women (H.D., Stein, Woolf, Moore)…Plath saw herself as oscillating between these two, or rather three,

unprecedented male and female/ female poles… (209). That Plath struggled with standards dictated by the "maestros" is evident not only in the awkwardness of some of her earlier writing, but is also sometimes relayed through the themes of poems where she chastises herself for not finding the muse, the rhyme, the imagination needed to write a superior poem.

Plath's choice of subjects in the poetry she wrote between 1956 and 1959 lean toward the traditional topics of the day. According to Nancy Hargrove in her book, The Journey Towards Ariel: Sylvia Plath's Poems of 1956-1959, "until the end of 1959, Plath strove almost exclusively for 'that saving sense of objectivity,' (Letters Home, 232) provided by subjects from the outside world." Much of Plath's efforts to conform to "outside themes" meant choosing an element, animal, or landscape from the natural world as a starting point for reflection.[14] At the same time, what this reflection usually conveys a kind of disappointment in not being able to find the poetic inspiration that urged someone like Shelley, Keats, or Wordsworth to heights of passion. For example, in "Hardcastle Crags," the speaker cannot generate flights of poetic imagery in the scene before her:

> All the night gave her, in return
> For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
> Of her heart, was the humped indifferent iron
> Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set
> On black stone… (Hardcastle Crags)

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[14]. This can be evidenced by a selection of poem titles written during her early years: "Winter Landscape, With Rooks " (1956), "The Great Carbuncle" (1957), "Sow" (1957), "Owl" (1958), "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" (1958) "Frog Autumn" (1958), "Magnolia Shoals" (1959), etc.

Of course, one could argue as Marjorie Perloff does, in her article "Angst and Animism in Sylvia Plath" that Plath is here trying to copy her contemporaries' mode of detachment and distance from poetic subjects. According to Perloff, what is important about "Hardcastle Crags" is how it reveals Plath's unsuccessful attempt to emulate the impersonal poetic advocated by T.S. Eliot in Tradition and the Individual Talent, a style which, Perloff claims, Plath revokes in her Ariel poems in exchange for an "oracular" one, "in the tradition of such later eighteenth-century poets as Smart, Cowper, Collins and Blake." (110) The thesis of Perloff's article is that in the Plathian world, "human beings are dead, inanimate, frozen… while everything that is is non-human is intensely alive, vital potent," (110) and that this philosophy conflicted with the impersonal mode in which Plath was trying to write: "she did not understand that third-person description, narrative, or ironic observation were alien to her poetic vision." (112) Perloff assumes that "Hardcastle Crags" attempts to illustrate a common theme in the era of modernist detatchment --"the alien and hostile qualities of nature" (113) but that Plath's true feelings about nature as a vital and potent force betray this intended theme. Perloff's reading of the poem, therefore, points to where the poem fails to convey its theme noting an "inappropriate precision [which] spoils the end of the poem," and "the orderly chronological sequence of images in the poem [which do]… not accord with the mental and emotional states that are portrayed." (Perloff 113)

While I agree with Perloff's contention that Plath's early poetry indicates a discomfort with traditional standards, I would insist on framing the excerpt above, not as an attempt to emulate Eliot's poetic detachment, but as a depiction of a crisis in feminine lyric subjectivity a crisis that is borne by addressing another of Eliot's standards: writing

within the tradition. Writes Eliot, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Eliot 2207). Plath's illustration of a poet's relationship with nature in "Hardcastle Crags" is not simply that of a contemporary poet rejecting what she perceived to be the Romantic model for lyric subjectivity -- one of happy communion with the natural world -- for Plath's estrangement from the Romantic model of lyric subjectivity is as much a theme in her early poetry as is her estrangement from the New Critic's model. "Hardcastle Crags" depiction of a subject's alienation from the natural world is only an echo of another kind of alienation featured in the poem: an alienation from lyric subjectivity. I believe that the theme of the poem is not "man's alienation from nature" but "a woman poet's alienation from the tradition of poetry."

To begin with, that the protagonist is a woman is a key feature of "Hardcastle Crags." The poem is not only quick to designate a gender for its main character in the first line, "Flintlike her feet struck" but also repeats its use of a gendered pronoun throughout the poem. Within this nine-stanza poem, there are eleven instances of "her" and three instances of "she." Additionally, both the penultimate and line of the poem places a gendered pronoun in an emphatic position:

> Of stones and hills of stones could break
> Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
> She turned back.

The enjambment of the poem places both a visual and potentially audible (depending on how you read line-breaks) stress on the gender of this character.

Second, I would argue that the theme of poem is not confined to the protagonist's alienation from nature. The illustration of the woman's inability to find poetic solace and inspiration in nature is simply an echo of what the poem establishes in the first two stanzas: the sense of isolation this woman feels as she walks the streets of a town: "Flintlike, her feet struck / Such a racket of echoes from the steely street, / …from the black/ Stone-built town…" The beginning lines of the second stanza amplify the echoes noted in the first:

> …
> A firework of echoes from wall
> To wall of the dark, dwarfed cottages.

The third instance of "echoes," in the lines following, notes their disappearance:

> But the echoes died at her back as the walls
> Gave way to fields and the incessant seethe of grasses
> Riding in the full
>
> Of the moon…

The dampening of the echoes in the grass, as well as the stanza's final emphatic "full," anticipate a change in the woman's sense of isolation; the reader is set up to expect solace forthcoming. The subsequent stanzas do not provide it and the woman does not find poetic communion with this natural setting:

> For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
> of her heart, was the humped indifferent iron
> Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set
> on black stone…

Thus, "echo" in the first two stanzas is not simply a descriptive detail used to set the scene; "echo" describes the very structure of the narrative movement within the poem. Despite the hope for resolution set up by the "grasses / Riding in the full // moon," the woman finds this scene only echoes the echo of her initial sense of alienation. This

alienation is not just echoed by a detachment from nature but also by a detachment from language. The third and fourth stanzas point to a disconnection from the natural world *as well as* a disconnection from a verbal one. A mist that rises from the valley

…fattened

> To no family-featured ghost
> Nor did any word body with a name
> The blank mood she walked in."

What is at stake for the woman in "Hardcastle Crags" is not simply her inability to commune with nature; it is, additionally, the inability to communicate *tha*t inability, to find a word that could name her "blank mood." The woman cannot inhabit the role of the lyric subject, the subject-body that would body forth the sound and song of poetry, for what the poem indicates in the sixth stanza is that it is the ear -- the receptacle of sound -- and not the throat, voice, or mouth -- that which would produce sound -- which is the featured body part of this poem:

> The long wind, paring her person down
> To a pinch of flame, blew its burdened whistle
> In the whorl of her ear, and scooped-out pumpkin crown
> Her head cupped the babel.

Without a voice, the echo of alienation (which is, in a sense, the echo of echoes) is the only "song" which "Hardcastle Crags" produces.

As a result, the frustration of not being able to produce poetic lyricism with the materials of nature, while a theme in much of Plath's early poetry, is not, I think, an effort to emulate the style of the day, but as an attempt to depict a particularly gendered struggle with the writing of poetry. Plath's poem, "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," for example, certainly depicts a struggle to find poetic material in the natural world: "However I wrench obstinate bark and trunk/ To my sweet will, no luminous

shape/ Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip," Moreover, with the lines, "To hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank/ Spurns such fiction/ as nymphs," the depiction of this struggle seems to support the doctrine of impersonal subjectivity. However, to frame "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" as simply a struggle between modernism and romanticism neglects features of the poem which illuminate a more profound crisis. Although the protagonist of the poem is not gendered, Plath elides or more specifically, amputates, the sex of the protagonist in what could be considered a "telling" move. The "speaker" in the poem is bodied forth as a body without a body. It is a thinking head -- a "vaunting mind," an importunate head," or a "beggared brain." The problem identified in the poem -- "that damn scrupulous tree [which] won't…concoct a Daphne," and the resulting absence of a "luminous shape/ [which would] step… out radiant in limb, eye, lip" -- is re-enacted in the poem's depiction of a subject-speaker. The poem, like the tree, will not give us a corporeal shape; it deprives us of body. Does the poem, then, ultimately agree with Eliot's idea of what is "the best poetry?" Once again, Eliot did not simply advocate the superiority of an impersonal subjectivity; he also claimed that the best poetry was born of tradition and what better symbol is there for tradition than that of the tree?[15] The tree is the patriarchal model of familial legacy, of a genealogy which branches from a single continuous source. In this light, that the speaker cannot fashion a feminine form from a *tree* is not an incidental detail, and the speaker's estrangement from

[15] Consider how Eliot depicts the tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent:" "…what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."(2207)

the "tree," is not simply the result of a conflict between traditional models. It is a conflict with tradition, itself.

In the poems where Plath's persona does seem to find "inspiration," it is of a decidedly cacophonic and confusing nature – not simply unpleasant but overwhelming, too distinct and different to be articulated in poetic expression. In "On the Plethora of Dryads," the companion piece to "On the Difficult of Conjuring up a Dryad," Plath indicates her inability to "envision" is marred by actual vision:

> Battle however I would
> To break through that patchwork
> Of leaves' bicker and whisk in babel tongues,
> Streak and mottle of tawn bark,
> No visionary lightnings
> Pierced my dense lid.
> Instead, a wanton fit
> Dragged each dazzled sense apart
> Surfeiting eye, ear, taste, touch smell;
> ……..
> And such grit corrupts my eyes
> I must watch sluttish dryads twitch
> Their multifarious silks in the holy grove
> …

Plath links the process of forming a poetic vision to the process of finding the muse or the source of poetic inspiration which is, traditionally, an idealized representation of femininity. To find the dryad in the woods, to form a song that "see[s] with the spotless soul" requires, the speaker of the poem declares, the ability to"blind sense." The speaker cannot find a unified container, an organized shape or ideal to realize a particular because she sees *too much*. She cannot shape a *woman* out of *women.* She cannot ignore the sexuality of the "sluttish dryads" to render them pure just as cannot she fix the "twitch" of "their multifarious silks" into a single frozen ideal

Perloff has argued, that Plath's early work struggles with the "impersonal" doctrine of formalist poetic standards. However, features of Plath's early work indicate that the poet, herself, was not ignorant of this struggle. In Plath's work, the impersonal aesthetic is often contemplated thematically as a violent interference in the rendering of a particular subject, where one can trace a battle played out between the desire to preserve the sanctity of human emotions versus the desire to exploit human emotions for poetic wit and richness. "In Plaster" portrays a struggle between human flesh and perfect form; "Mirror" depicts human feelings struggling with the "true" aesthetic assessment of the mirror. "Perseus: The Triumph of Wit Over Suffering" provides an allegory for this battle wherein the story of Perseus' heroicism trumps any compassion for the tragic figure, Medusa:

> You enter now,
> Armed with feathers to tickle as well as fly,
> And a fun-house mirror that turns the tragic muse
> To the beheaded head of a sullen doll…

That there is a kind of violence exerted in writing "for the effect" is particularly evident in Plath's poem, "Rhyme." Given the poem's title, one would assume that the beginning of the poem partially alludes to the frustrations of non-productive writing:

> I've got a stubborn goose whose gut's
> Honeycombed with golden eggs,
> Yet won't lie one.

The goose who lays the golden eggs, so to speak, won't lay one for this writer. The speaker's solution to this non-productivity is to kill the goose. Although she hesitates when the goose "begs/ Pardon," the beauty of the goose and the speaker's desire to obtain *something* from it, quickly changes this temporary resolution:

> Now, as I hone my knife, she begs

Pardon, and that's

So humbly done, I'd turn this keen
Steel on myself before profit
By such a rogue's
Act, but – how those feathers shine!

Exit from a smoking slit
Her ruby dregs.

The death of the goose provides the color, the riches (red/ruby in lieu of gold) as well as the necessary rhyme: "dregs" substitutes for the desired "eggs."

While "Rhyme" and "Perseus" seem to struggle with an aesthetic productivity rewarded by a violent detachment from compassion or empathy, I would suggest that Plath's later poems depict no such moral battle. Instead, they enact it. For example, it is not the last stanza, as in "Rhyme," but in the very first stanza that the poem, "Cut," invokes violence. It is the instance of injury, the slicing off of part of the thumb, that inaugurates, the poetic wit of "Cut." Pain or human response to injury is not an issue at all. Rather, the injury provides rich writing material and the poem proceeds as a kind of celebratory simile-making riffing on the cut thumb. In fact, it could be said that what's ironic about the first line in the poem, "What a thrill" is that it's not ironic. The quick movement from one metaphor to another proceeds as a kind of exalted exercise in wit:

What a thrill –
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.

Your turkey wattle

Carpet rolls
Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.
A celebration this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Detachment yields its own poeticism, one of startling and vivid imagery. Viewing the self as a thing or an object makes metaphor-making a simpler task and Plath's poetry seems to revel in the richness of this image making potential. The human body as thing provides the poet with visual objects to paint, picture, and portray. For the surgeon in "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." the opened body provides a garden of "tubers and fruits" or a "purple wilderness" in which he can "worm and hack":

This is the lung-tree
these orchids are splendid. They spot and coil like snakes.
The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress.

Like "Surgeon at 2 am," "Cut" uses injury of the human body not as a segue into a reflection on human pain, but as an avenue for aesthetic exploration, an occasion for exercising trade skills. The kitchen accident becomes not a minor tragedy, but a champagne-popping event, a celebration of poetic productivity. That the cost of this aesthetic ebullience is a detachment from extreme violence is evident, for the metaphors in "Cut" include the scalping of pilgrims, the deployment of British soldiers, the sabotage of kamikaze pilots, and (for a bandage, one assumes) the blood-stained white garments of the Ku Klux Klan.

One can no longer view Plath's later poetry as "confessional" when one realizes that what Plath brings to the forefront of her later work is the very absence of human feeling or emotion. Indeed, even "Cut" alludes to the void created by Plath's impersonal "I." In her personification of the thumb as a "saboteur," "Kamikaze man," a "humunculous," and Ku Klux Klan member, Plath writes

> The balled
> Pulp of your heart
> Confronts its small
> mill of silence

What should be recognized in the poems of Ariel, as in "Cut" is not the confessions of the human heart but rather the silence of it. This silence resides in the excess of poetic effect, the macabre and "inhuman" celebration of wit triumphing over suffering.

Poetic excess in the case of Plath's poetry, then, is an indication of words detached from human thought or emotion. It is this gesture of poetic excess that foregrounds the fact that there is something that is not being said or that can't be said. Hyperbole helps the reader identify not the "talk" in the poems, but the "talk talk talk" in them – the mechanical script within the words rather than the heartfelt outpouring of them. Plath's feminine "subject" as a product of a script, also speaks in "script." The mechanical doll speaks mechanically. Plath's work is often criticized for its melodrama or even its "hysteria:" her work is overdone or overwrought and it offends the sensibility of a critic who has learned to appreciate the more restrained voice as the sincere voice. In these cases, the excessive gestures of performance in Plath's work are criticized rather than *read*. In other words, if we move from the point-of-view that this hyperbole is not incidental or superfluous but rather crucial to what the poetry is saying, then it becomes almost impossible to classify Plath's later work as confessional

Extreme detachment from object-imagery is one of the features of Plath's gestures of poetic excess – an exaggeration of the ideal impersonal status of the speaker. Her later poetry, however, also makes hyperbolic gestures with rhetorical devices and sound effects. In "Daddy," one of Plath's more famous poems, Plath's speaker appropriates the infantalized position of women to address a father-figure. Despite allusions to autobiographical facts in Plath's life, the poem cannot be read as "true-to-life" because the poem constantly reminds us through a hyperbole of infantalization, that this is an assumed role.

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> for thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.
>
> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> You died before I had time –
> ….

The rhyme of "oo" is persistent in the poem: each stanza contains at least one instance of this rhyme and most contain more. Consider the ninth stanza:

> I have always been scared of you.
> With your Luftwafe, your gobbledygoo.
> And your neat moustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, o You.

The "oo" chime turns the poem, tonally, into a child's chant or song. The poem's heavy use of word and phrase repetition lend to this sing-songiness. For example, "You do not do, you do not do," "Panzer-man, Panzer-man, o You" and the last line, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." On a tonal level, the poem echoes the "goo goo goo" of baby babbling (and indeed prompts this allusion with its choice of words in the ninth stanza),

while semantically, it addresses violent and "taboo" subjects such as Nazism, the Holocaust, an "Electra complex," and patricide. The irony is evident.

If one reads the poem on a purely semantic level, it's good material for justifying the usefulness of Freudian analysis. However, it is dismissive of Plath's ability as a poet to assume that she would merely enact a Freudian drama for her readers (for it is clearly a staged drama with its speaker issuing "goo goo goo" sounds throughout) without any commentary or flourish of her own. Certainly, the speaker is commenting on her inability to articulate herself and come forward as an adult self in her father's world. In the poem, the German language is the vehicle of articulation and self-assertion which the speaker cannot master: when she tries to speak the German language ("the language of the father"), she stutters upon the very word, "I." Instead, what resonates throughout the poem, in its echoing obsessive rhyme, is "du(do)," the German familiar form of "you:" "I used to pray to recover you./ Ach, du." The linguistic metaphor is stretched into a historical one where the speaker compares her victimhood to that of a Jew in the hands of a Nazi fascist:

> I never could talk to you.
> the tongue stuck in my jaw.
>
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich
> I could hardly speak.
> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene
>
> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew.

The speaker may stumble on "ich," but, clearly, she does not seem to have a problem with the articulation of "Jew." Repeated four times in one stanza, three times before the end of a line and punctuation mark and moreover, within the poem's chime of "oo," the speaker's "identification" with a Jew is an emphatic gesture. Before one stops to consider the question of whether Plath's speaker "really" identifies with a victim of the Holocaust, let's consider the choice of metaphors. Plath could not have picked a more exaggerated metaphor for victimhood than this. Indeed, the historical and personal trauma of the Holocaust is such that it resists any kind of description or depiction let alone metaphor-making, but here Plath is using it facilely and emphatically in a poem that's singing, gooing, and cooing. To say that the difference between tone and topic is extreme is an understatement. This poem doesn't slaughter its goose for a rhyme. It pulverizes it. How can we miss that gesture when it uses "Jew, Jew, Jew" as an emphatic punctuation mark? As Ann Keniston writes in her essay, "The Holocaust Again," "Daddy" as well as Plath's other "Holocaust" poems "reveal Plath to be concerned not so much with capturing the essence of the Holocaust as with the ways the Holocaust resists representation….The poems connect historical with textual violence, making the Holocaust's corruption visible through the corruption of the poems themselves." ((140)

Thus, it's a mistake to read "Daddy" as if it were simply describing or commenting on a father-daughter relationship. For one, it's speaker comments on how it can't "comment" ("ich, ich, ich./ I could hardly speak) on this. Instead, the speaker shows us, through the hyperbolization of the speaker's infantalized position in hyperbolic contrast with what one might consider a hyperbolic metaphor (especially, since the

offhanded use of this trauma as metaphor-material is in of itself a hyperbolic gesture), how she *can't* describe this relationship. She *shows* us. She enacts her own state of inarticulation by regurgitating the script: the script where the speaker is trapped in a forever childlike un-self-actualizable status as "Daddy's little girl." The poem is not just criticizing a suburban script for feminine identity; it's also criticizing a Freudian one which, Plath's poem seems to indicate, strips subjective assertion from a feminine identity:

> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do
>
> But they pulled me out of the sack,
> And they stuck me together with glue.
> And then I knew what to do.
> I made a model of you,
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
>
> And a love of the rack and the screw.
> And I said I do, I do.

What the speaker says in her marriage vows only reinforces her inability to articulate a self, since it reinforces the echoing chime that reminds us that "I" cannot say I. It can only say "do/du." While the first line of the poem might have asserted "You do not do, you do not do," while it may have claimed to have "had to kill you" with "a stake in your fat black heart," "du/do" does not disappear even when it says "I'm through" because the "oo" in "du/do/shoe/Achoo/through/ Jew/ gobbledygoo" is the very building block of the script. It's the word, rhyme, chime that holds the poem together *as* a poem – for what is a poem? One of the more popular pedestrian responses to this question is "Words that rhyme." And here we find the excess that ironizes the very status of "Daddy" as poem,

scripting itself through the simplest, most basic form of what is acknowledged as a poem – the rhyme.

Thus, while biographical details may enhance a reading "Daddy," interpretations which focus on "connecting the dots" or linking allusions in the poem to Plath's life story, overlook any potential meta-commentary in Plath's poem. Based on the comments she wrote in the margins of Plath's Ariel, Anne Sexton, for example, a poet who knew Plath, personally, seems to have assumed Plath's uncritical use of the Freudian model. Next to the final stanzas of "Daddy" where Plath alludes to a marriage: "I made a model of you,/ A man in black with a Meinkampf look// And a love of the rack and the screw./ And I said I do, I do," Sexton has written "(Ted)," "marriage," and "Ted's infidelity." In a desire to decode the contents of Plath's poem, Sexton's comments would veer a reader away from a critical approach to the familial model in favor of a biographical translation of it. However, as recent critics have noted, given Plath's familiarity with Freud's writings, it is more likely that she is self-consciously reflecting on the Freudian drama as a script for narrativizing familial relationships. As Laure De Nervaux writes in her essay, "The Freudian Muse, psychoanalysis and the problem of self-revelation in Sylvia Plath's Daddy and Medusa," "The speaker recreates herself and the persons she addresses, turning them into mythological or theatrical characters at the very moment when she claims to be deciphering, exposing their true nature. The Freudian family romance offers the script for a fantastical rewriting of the poet's biography, turning the "I" and its addresses into allegorical figures." (62)

Given the poetic excess and ironies of "Daddy," I would suggest that reading the poem's speaker as a stand-in for Plath is not unlike reading the mechanical doll in "The

Applicant" as a stand-in for Plath. Although there are autobiographical allusions in Daddy (such as the German language and the allusion to Otto's amputated foot) I would suggest reading this poem autobiographically misses its most important message which is that in lieu of herself, Plath is offering us a form of self-representation which illustrates the violence and self-destructiveness implicated in appropriating available representations for femininity and feminine roles. Given the available representations for femininity and feminine roles, Plath is saying, here is my poetic lyric "self." This self cannot talk but it can "talk talk talk." To confuse the "talk talk talk" for "talk" is to miss the very point of the poem.

"Lady Lazarus" is another poem of Plath's that uses poetic excess to expose the scripting of feminine roles. Like "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus" contains autobiographical allusions – here, to Plath's two prior suicide attempts. However, to confine the poem to an autobiographical reading is to ignore the deliberate gestures of rhetorical excess in the poems. First of all, the poem clearly situates the speaker within a commercial and theatrical setting: the carnival. The speaker is at once the side-show and the side-show talker: exhibiting herself, pitching herself, and selling herself as an objectified female body:

> What a million filaments.
> the peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot –
> The big strip tease.
> Gentleman, ladies
>
> These are my hands
> my knees.

The survival of suicide attempts is only another feature with which the salesperson-self sells the "act." It is a skill which renders her a freak show curiosity piece, the "walking miracle" that the crowds would "shove in to see."

> ….
> Dying
> is an art, like everything else
> I do it exceptionally well.

These stanzas read like catchphrases in an advertisement with its use of anaphora: "I do it…" and "It's easy enough…" – and repeated end rhymes (some are exact, some slant) – else / well / hell / real / call/ cell. The subsequent stanzas reinforce the context of advertising/ sales with the double entendre of "charge."

> It's the theatrical
>
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout:
>
> 'A miracle!'
> That knocks me out
> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart –
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood
>
> Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
> …

Here, charge means "the thrill" but given that the context of the carnival act as well as the sales-pitch rhetoric, the reader is easily led to consider "charge" as the price of admission, too.

Although Helen Vendler identifies the "barker" as one of the many voices used in Lady Lazarus(10-11) I would suggest that this, or rather the "talker"[16] is the pervading voice in the poem. A talker was a vendor, a salesman, who sold tickets for the "girl show," (Stencell 97-98) or the more risqué "cooch show" which was usually the carnival's main money earner (Stencell 80-91). Plath, here, is using glib-tongued carny talk to sell her own body for its sex, for its freakishness, for its horror, and for its status as a "walking miracle" (having "come back" twice from death). If a woman's identity is split into surveyor and surveyed, here the surveyor takes on an added role as the surveyed's "pimp," describing the curiosities, kicks, and attractions one can get from viewing the woman-as-surveyed-object. The excess of rhetorical devices in the poem make the majority of it read as a pitch.

What Sylvia Plath's later poems indicate is that the feminine-subject-on display is not merely an effect of a script but that it is, itself, a script. The hyperbolic gestures of Plath's later work point out the very scriptedness with which she is writing. It's as if she takes the features that define a poem – repetition, rhyme, structure, imagery – and characterizes them for us, pushing the sanctified trappings of the formalist poem into a carnivalesque space – a circus, a freakshow, a funnyhouse, a Punch-and-Judy puppet show.

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[16] Apparently, "talker" is the preferred term for carnival workers: "'Barker' was *never* an authentic carnival term. Carnies call the person gathering a tip for a show a 'talker' — the 'outside talker' attracts the tip and the 'inside talker' or 'lecturer' conducts the crowd through a ten-in-one show, describing the acts and building interest in the 'blowoff'. Moreover, 'hurry hurry hurry', the phrase you often hear chanted by the 'barker' in movies, is far less sophisticated than the real outside talker's intricately contrived appeals. (http://carnylingo.pbworks.com/w/page/15256337/Carnival-Lingo)

According to Susan Van Dyne's Book Revising Life, "For Sylvia Plath, revising her life was a recurrent personal and poetic necessity… Plath's habits of self-representation suggest she regarded her life as if it were a text that she could invent and rewrite. (1) However, I would argue that more important than identifying how Plath "rewrites" the text of life is identifying how Plath indicates how the text is already written, already scripted, already dictated by the "maestros." David Shapiro says of Plath in his essay, "Sylvia Plath: Drama and Melodrama " that "… she lived.. in the prisonhouse of language, and one senses the terrible pressure that these cliché – clichés of the college, clichés of education, clichés of the mother… exerted upon her" (52) and, although I disagree with Shapiro's argument in this essay, I think this observation is astute as is his conclusion that "Poetry as pencil, as voice, and as magic failed her."(49) Shapiro believes that Plath's work "is exactly deficient in the consciousness of writing itself,"(48) but I believe that Plath's work *gesturally* provides us the cues with which to identify the scripts that pervade her work and I will continue to try and prove that in this chapter.

2.4 Ensuring an Audience: The Lure of Autobiography in Plath's Poetry

There are specific words and images which appear frequently throughout Plath's poetry. Given the popular conception of Plath as a gothic poet, blood, poison, and death tend to be the more often noted ones. However, there is another recurring word/image which is crucial to reading how Plath's work conceives its personae, and how these personae engage a reading audience. The word is "hook" and here a few examples from Plath's oeuvre:

> The air is a mill of hooks –
> Questions without answer,
> Glittering and drunk as flies
> …
> ("Mystic")
>
> I am inhabited by a cry,
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.
> ("Elm")
>
> …
> How did I get here?
> Indeterminate criminal
> I die with variety –
> Hung, starved, burned, hooked.
> ("The Jailor")
>
> Smilingly, blue lighting
> Assumes, like a meathook, the burden of his parts
> …
> These children are after something, with hooks and cries
>
> And my heart too small to bandage their terrible faults
> …
> ("Berck-Plage")

As an image, "hook" could mean various things. The critic Linda Bundzten, who also notes the frequency of this word in Plath's work, suggests that the word "hook" refers literally to the writing style of Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's husband, and figuratively to the type of writing relationship the two had with one another:

> Plath's textual body is also hopelessly entangled with that of her husband, Ted Hughes. Many of the manuscripts and typescripts for her poems are written on his backside, so to speak: Plath recycles old manuscripts and typescripts by Hughes, and often she seems to be back-talking, having the last word in

> argument… Plath cannot cut herself off from Hughes, cannot surgically amputate her life from his; she can only tattoo his papery body with images of her grief for his deceptions, his desertions, his infidelities… The friction between these two bodies is palpable at times, as text clashes with text, and one intuits Plath's purposeful coercion and filleting of Hughes' poems and plays as she composes. Even some of Plath's phrases
>
> > And here is an end to the writing,
> > The spry hooks that bend and cringe,…
> > ('Burning the Letters')
> >
> > The tongue stuck in my jaw.
> > It stuck in a barb wire snare—
> > ('Daddy')
> >
> > …small, mean and black
> >
> > Every little word hooked to every little word
> > ('Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices,')
>
> allude to Hughes' sometimes indecipherable handwriting, clotted with a thicket of curlicues, hooks, flourishes, and backward snarelike strokes that might literally tongue-tie a feminine voice, stuttering to assert herself in the presence of a stronger masculine one: "Ich, ich, ich, ich" ('Daddy')
>
> (Bundtzen 7-8)

Bundzten's reading of the word "hook" asserts a particular biographical narrative for reading Plath's poetry – Plath's voice was entangled, trapped, snared, "hooked" within that of her husband's. However, the three examples I cited above show that "hooks" appears in more contexts than Bundzten's reading would suggest; they do not always seem to allude to a struggle to assert the feminine voice in the presence of a masculine

one. In “Mystic,” hooks are used to describe the lure of mystery; in “Elm” they allude to a need to find emotional attachments outside oneself; in “The Jailor” they indicate a method of death; in “The Other,” they describe the assumption of a particular identity; and in Berck-Plage, they illustrate how the needs of children pull upon parental instincts. While hooks may, at times, allude to Hughes handwriting, it seems that given the other context in which “hooks” appears, a broader definition is needed. One can’t rule out the most literal definition of hook as a thing or instrument, “A curved or sharply bent device, usually of metal, used to catch, drag, suspend, or fasten something else” (freedictionary.com) , nor Plath’s use of its variations in form: as a prosthetic device,

> Do you wear
> a glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
> A brace or a hook…
> (“The Applicant”)

as a slaughterhouse implement, “a hook on which to hang meat carcasses,” (freedictionary.com)

> …
> Assumes , like a meathook, the burden of his parts
> (“The Other”)

or as a cutting/ gardening tool, “a heavy thick knife or chopper with a hooked end, used for pruning, cutting brushwood, etc.” (freedictionary.com)

> Then there is that antique billhook, the tongue,
> Indefatigable, purple/
> Must it be cut out?
> (“The Courage of Shutting Up”)

One also can’t ignore the figurative implications of “hook,” especially as a colloquial or slang term: “to take strong hold of, captivate,” “to cause to become addicted”

> my husband and child smiling out of the family photo;

their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks,
("Tulips")

These children are after something, with hooks and cries
…
("Berck-Plage")

The air is a mill of hooks –
Questions without answer.
("Mystic")

Given Plath's multi-faceted use of hooks, I would suggest that this word is more crucial to a reading of her oeuvre than simply as a specific image or metaphor, and that Plath's use of "hook" in certain poems to indicate a powerful means of drawing another in emotionally or intellectually, indicates a familiarity with the "hook" as a means or a device. I would suggest that the "hook" is a tool which Plath's poetry does not simply *reference* but also *employs* as a way of engaging the reader -- and that the connotations of the "hook" as a specific thing or instrument are relevant, that fastening the attention of the reader sometimes involves a violence which can trap, pierce, or gore; and while, "hooking" sometimes alludes to as an insidious process:

…
Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?
It is your knitting, busily

Hooking itself to itself
It is your sticky candies.
("The Other")

it also alludes to human need – the need to be cared for, loved, or wanted; the desire to belong.

Figuratively speaking, the "hook" suggests that attention is a free-floating entity which can be attached or unattached. In journalism, the hook is what catches a reader's attention. In business, a "sales hook" is what attracts clients. However, I also think that Plath's use of hook extends to her view of feminine identity as an appropriation of roles/images roles that can be assumed or discarded at will. For example, in her poem, Fever 103, Plath explains the process by which she achieves a state of "purity": "(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)." (Of course, Plath's "pure" self is as artificial as any of the others since it takes on the form of a plastic figurine: "…a pure acetylene / Virgin / Attended by roses.") In Plath's world, "selves" are costumes that one hooks on to or off of oneself like costumes to a paper doll. Indeed, Plath was clearly familiar with this practice as she drew her own paper dolls as well as their attachable/ detachable costumes for herself when she was a child. (191) Sally Bayley, in her article, "Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity," finds evidence in Plath's artwork to support the argument that Plath viewed femininity as a set of outfits that could be "hooked" on pulled off. Plath was a visual artist in addition to a poet and Bayley makes an extensive review of the poet's body of artwork to evidence Plath's preoccupation with the different and sometimes ideologically conflicting feminine icons that saturated post-World War II American culture. Bayley's review of materials is extensive: she examines the depictions of suburban life in the hand-made cards Plath made for her relatives when she was a child (186-187), the sketches of forties starlets and fashion figures drawn by Plath in the margins of both her high school and college notebooks, as well as the magazine cut-outs pasted in Plath's art scrapbooks that show conflicting images of passive domesticity and suggestive sexuality (92).

Of course, one of the more obvious "hooks" in Plath's writing is its shock-value. Her poems take advantage of emotionally-charged words and subjects: "blood," "poison," "murder," are littered throughout Plath's poetry. Often, topics or themes in the poems are ones that could easily incite controversy or indignation, and Plath's seemingly light use of religious figures or "miracles" and historical tragedies as metaphors or similes comes across as blasphemous. Plath's poetry takes advantage of such forms as the mystery, the "pot-boiler," the tabloid article; and it may have even anticipated the modern popularity of the "true crime" genre. Rather than read these hooks as symptomatic of Plath's own personality, I suggest that these reflect and reveal Plath's marketing savvy -- a knowledge of what draws in the crowds. Plath's poetry use of these "gimmicks" belies one of the oft-used quotes in the world of journalism: " If it bleeds, it leads." Certainly, Plath herself was aware of the commercial element of publishing and knew how to tailor her stories to fit a particular audience. In Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life, Linda Wagner-Martin examines how Plath's ambition to earn money and achieve renown by writing "pot boilers for women's magazines" (17) may have overpowered literary instincts in some of her stories. For example, Plath's story, "Sunday at the Mintons" describes an oppressive relationship between an aged sister and brother. The story seems to indulge a dramatic ending when the protagonist sees her brother, who is attempting to retrieve her brooch, fall into the water and carried out to the sea by the waves, thereby liberating her both literally and figuratively from her submission. However, the story frames this event as a product of the protagonist's imagination. She "wakes" from this reverie to find her brother handing her the lost broach. (18) As Wagner-Martin argues,

> It becomes, then a palatable story, its more frightening elements that speak of gender power covered over by the peaceful – if fantastic – ending. That it won for Plath a $500 prize, in a year when she anguished over Smith College having increased its annual tuition by $150, marked her strategies as brilliant. (19)

Lynda Bundzten's book, The Other Ariel, agrees with this depiction of Plath's conscious commercialism, arguing that Plath took "extraordinary care… to make her manuscripts marketable." In the lists she kept of poems that had been accepted to different journals, Plath recorded not only how much she had been paid for each poem, but also calculated how much each line was worth. (9)

Critics who dismiss Plath from the canon or from the realm of "high art" for use of such commercial or attention-getting techniques, usually overlook the transgressive use of this particular hook, this "sensationalism." As Britzolakis notes,

> The critical debate about Plath tends to be organized around an opposition between expressive depths and tawdry surfaces, between 'high' and 'low' culture. Yet it is this very opposition which her 'Decadent' style puts into question, since it situates itself as part of a culture in which self-revelation or self-expression has itself become a cliché" (137)[17]

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[17] In her article,"The 'Priestess' and Her 'Cult:' Plath's Confessional Poetics and the Mythology of Women Readers," Janet Badia suggests that this critique of Plath's poetry has been an effort to contain the threat of its popularity: "From even the most cursory review of the critics writing at the time, especially to those schooled in either New Criticism or the high canonical modernist tradition of T.S. Eliot that sought to create

Certainly, one can't deny that Plath may have used these methods to earn money and to get published, but the self-consciousness with which they are employed, the hyperbole and irony with which they are delivered, indicates a calculated foray into low culture tactics. If one reads "Lady Lazarus" as Plath's *ars poetica*, than the use of sensationalism is the attention-getting device a woman must employ in a world ruled by men (and even in an afterlife ruled by men – the speaker addresses "Herr God" and a "Herr Lucifer" near the end of the poem).

However, because of the way this sensationalism is rendered, it also serves as a form of what Lynda K. Bundzten refers to as "back-talking," (7) a practice for which she finds a particularly illustrative example in material evidence from the Plath archives – the poems that Plath wrote on the backsides of Hughes' old typescripts. As was noted earlier, it was Bundzten's description of these manuscripts which informed her poetic interpretation of Plath's "hooks:" "Her words are on top and one peeks at the other side, often finding her ink has bled through, indelibly splotching and staining Hughes's work." (7) Bundzten's observations on "back-talking" develop upon the argument initially made by Susan Van Dyne in Revising Life, that one can explore how Plath's poems talk back to Hughes and the male literary tradition he represented[18] by retracing Plath's "history of reusing paper associated with particular periods of her life and with landmarks in her

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a small, elite audience, Plath's work threatened to disrupt the very reputability of the literary project and thus had to be contained" (171).

[18] According to Van Dyne, "Plath's sense of her own symbolic and real belatedness meant that male literary history was inescapably mediated by Hughes. In her psychic economy he came to stand for the literary tradition she once thought she might enter directly." (21) Wagner-Martin's account of Plath writing on subjects and titles provided by Hughes certainly supports this argument (90).

own and Hughes' writing career."(8) Van Dyne provides "Burning the Letters," as an example: the first poem Plath wrote after she had legally separated from Hughes and he had moved back to London "for good" was written on the back of Hughes's "The Thought-Fox," what Van Dyne derives as "one of the most famous statements of his own poetics." (8-9)

One must consider Plath's poems as a calculated dramas, dramas which not being able to call attention to themselves through the methods valued by New Criticism, or the "high art" of the time, self-consciously resort to methods which would market her work beyond the scope of the "boy's club," so that the hook of shock-value seduction is not just a lure, but also a means with which to gore or pierce the sensibility of the male reader and critic. Writes Britzolakis, "As a writer, Plath framed herself, and was framed, within a highly gendered literary market in which 'pulp' writing was associated with femininity and truly literary writing with masculinity." 139

The controversy or blasphemy that Plath's poems perform is not simply a means of capturing the reader's attention; it is also a way of undermining the patriarchal roots of what is deemed poetically or religiously sacred.

Returning to the poem, "Lady Lazarus," consider its elements of back-talking sensationalism. One must pause on the title "Lady Lazarus." What does it mean to modify one of the most important figures of Christian doctrine, to make Lazarus feminine? Reassigning Lazarus' gender is a bold move in a religion where all the essential allegorical (or historical, depending on your interpretation of texts) figures are male. Even if one does not view this sex reassignment as "blasphemous," it's difficult to deny that the poem, itself, by invoking the story of Lazarus in the context of suicide, the

Holocaust, and a carnival "girl show," is mocking the sanctity of the traditions of Christian religiosity, particularly as they are rooted in patriarchal prejudice. Also, consider how the poem begins. The first two stanzas include allusions to one of the many atrocities committed during the Holocaust as well as to the act of suicide:

> I have done it again.
> One year in every ten
> I manage it –
>
> A sort of walking miracle, my skin
> Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot
>
> a paperweight,
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen.

Indicating that surviving suicide attempts is a miracle already mocks Christian doctrine since suicide is (according to the Catholic religion, at least) a mortal sin. But, I would also suggest that the allusion to a "Nazi lampshade" (a lampshade made out of the human skins of Nazi victims), and the substitution of Jew Linen for "shroud" also mocks the sanctity of the Lazarus miracle. This Lazarus, rather than reestablishing the sanctity of Christian doctrine, draws attention to its hypocrisy. The re-appearance of *this* Lazarus does not testify to Jesus Christ as the savior of humanity. Instead, it testifies to a historical instance of Christian impotence; *this* walking "miracle" reminds us, not of humanity, but of its opposite -- human cruelty.

In "Lady Lazarus," the transformation from dead to living is not received with awe or wonder. It is introduced by a conjunction almost as an afterthought:

> Soon, soon the flesh
> the grave cave ate will be
> At home on me

> And I am a smiling woman.
> I am only thirty.

The spectators are not potential converts; they are a crowd of greedy consumers which "shoves into see." One does not witness this spectacle; one ogles it. The body is not a holy entity; it is an objectified assemblage of parts:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
> Them unwrap me hand and foot –
> the big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies
>
> These are my hands
> My knees.
> I may be skin and bone,

This unveiling is not an awe-inducing miracle; it is cheap entertainment delivered with a fake smile.

The poetic form of Lady Lazarus mirrors this mockery of religious allegory. Although the poem is written in a form that, arguably, alludes to the Christic underpinnings of terza rima (the poem is written in tercets but the rhyme pattern doesn't follow traditional terza rima)[19] it reads as light verse written in childlike rhymes. Moreover, the passages that are overstacked with rhymes and repetitions are often the more disturbing or gory passages in the poem. For example consider, how the anticipated resurrection is described:

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[19] "Terza rima was introduced by Dante as an appropriate stanza form for his *Divina Commedia*. The symbolic reference to the Holy Trinity is obvious…"(Preminger and Brogan)

> Soon, soon the flesh
> The grave cave ate will be
> At home on me.

The poem focuses on the gritty details – decomposed flesh, a grave cave – and it delivers them with a mocking gravity. "Soon, soon" is reminiscent of one of the more stereotyped features of legends or tales – a redundant use of adverbs to heighten or exaggerate the gravity of a situation: "Long, long ago in a country far, far away…"

Another hook in Plath's later poetry is how it implicates the reader directly. Of the forty poems in Plath's Ariel, more than half of them make explicit or implicit (i.e., use of interrogative or imperative) use of apostrophe. As Ann Keniston writes

> although few readers have noticed the predominance of apostrophe in Plath's final volume, Ariel, attention to this apostrophe renders these poems less solitary than they often seem… Plath's apostrophe reveals desire as well as rage, the wish to possess as well as to repudiate, and a speaker who is solitary but also constituted by her interactions with others. (*Overheard Voices* 27)

I would argue that this address is one of the hooks of Plath's later poetry. "You" can be embodied by a husband, a father, a mother, a rival, a child; sometimes, it is not clear who "you" is. In almost every case, however, "you" is addressed with an enhanced display of tenderness, love, anger, bitterness, or pure rage. Plath's speakers are not soliloquists; they taunt, they cajole, whisper, yell, croon, cry. They project themselves outward and toward in a way that involves the reader in an intimate drama, whether it's as a substitute -- temporarily filling the shoes of the father, the husband, the child, the friend, the rival, the mother -- or as a secondary character. The experience is not so much one of

eavesdropping, where one is intent upon learning the private affairs of another, as it is of accidental involvement. I liken it to the experience of overhearing a shouting match between the neighboring couple or, in more benign terms, a melody played fortissimo and full pedal on a piano in the upstairs apartment. The reader becomes involved in a scene of domesticity which has been made so loud or so volatile that it becomes a kind of public event which necessarily includes her/him. It's as if the reader is unintentionally positioned "in the bedroom," so to speak. The element of scandal is almost always implied and the gossip-potential is high.

Thus, while sensationalism may be a "hook" in Plath's work, the context of this sensationalism – a domestic one, a private one -- is part of the seduction. By domestic space, I do not simply mean the mise-en-scène for some of her poems (for example, a nursery in "Morning Song," a kitchen in "Lesbos" or "Cut"), but a space reserved for domestic discussions or disputes . It is not by accident that, as Jacqueline Rose notes in The Haunting of Sylvia Plath that "One of the most striking things about the story of Plath is the way that… it seems so effortlessly to transmute itself into soap opera." (6) Plath read women's magazines. She knew the kinds of articles they contained, and she knew how to market her writing to them. Most American women in the 1950's defined themselves through domesticity, i.e., home-life and familial relationships or responsibilities. Rendering domestic occurrences and dialogues as meaningful or dramatic (rather than everyday or mundane) would certainly appeal to this audience.

However, Plath foregrounds the dramatization of domestic scenes. Consider poems such as "The Detective" which places a murder mystery within the context of "family photographs" and "plush carpets" (I will discuss this poem in more detail in the

next section of this chapter), as well as "Lesbos" which places reader within the kitchen at the same time that it places in her the artificial environment of the theater or Hollywood film:

> Viciousness in the kitchen!
> The potatoes hiss.
> It is all Hollywood, windowless,
> The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
> Coy paper strips for doors –
> Stage curtains, a widow's frizz. ("Lesbos")

In her article, "Viciousness in the Kitchen," Gina Kitchen describes this pattern in Plath's work as the "domestic Gothic,"a style that "express[es] the home-confined life of the housewife/mother" in a way that still "exposes the constructedness, the performativity of gendered roles, the oscillation between versions of self…" (2) Wisker locates this dramatization in how Plath introduces the "'unhimleich', the unfamiliar entering the everyday." "Cut," for example, a poem which begins with the description of a kitchen accident, proceeds to "conjure[] images of war, celebration, sickness and racial oppression (the Ku Klux Klan)."(4) Therefore, though Plath's domestic scenes and situations as well as their dramatic context were certainly "hooks" for modern readers, Plath does not manipulate such devices uncritically or without self-consciousness.

2.5 The Illusory Body: Staging the Script

Earlier in this chapter, I posed the question "What is it about Sylvia Plath's poetry that asks us, tempts us, dares us to read a living, breathing body into the text?" Although the hooks and the lures are there, the poems ultimately do not deliver a thing, a truth, an answer, and most certainly not a body. What the poems do give us, is an awareness of those hooks in another sense – as hooks or tags for the identity of the speaker herself. The roles she takes on are like different costumes -- "My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats" (Fever 103) – rather than authentic versions of selfhood.

Plath's theatricalization of domestic space includes a dimension which often implicates the reader in a particular kind of drama . As I noted earlier, the use of apostrophe, particularly in Plath's later poems, brings the reader into this theatrical space as a kind of participant and in certain cases, more specifically, as a witness or potential juror. At least a fourth of the poems in Ariel allude to or depict some sort of criminal activity – murder, torture, rape, drugging, imprisoning, taking hostage, even exile. Many of these poems take on an accusatory tone, as if the speaker were putting a specific person on trial – a "you" or a "him." As a result, the reader is put in the position of being a detective or a juror – we must find out who "you" or "he" is, we must make judgment, and then we must act. We must find someone or something to accuse. In biographical interpretations of Plath's work, this victimizer or criminal usually takes the shape of Ted Hughes. In "The Jailor," for example, the speaker illustrates feelings of confinement through the metaphor of a prison. Why is she confined to this prison? She doesn't know:

> How did I get here?
> Indeterminate criminal,
> I die with variety—
> Hung starved, burned, hooked.

There is clearly criminal activity and severe mistreatment in the poem but it is not the speaker who commits these crimes. The poem suggests that "The Jailor" is the criminal and that the motivation for this imprisonment/ torture is his own pleasure:

> I have been drugged and raped.
> Seven hours knocked out of my right mind
> Into a black sack
> …
> He has been burning me with cigarettes,
> Pretending I am a negress with pink paws.
> …
> My ribs show. What have I eaten?

Even though most readers would assume these scenarios are figurative, i.e., it is *as if* I have been drugged or raped, it *as if* he is burning me with cigarettes, such analogies would still convey that the victim has been severely wronged and that she has experienced a great deal of emotional pain at the hands of this "Jailor." I think it is safe to say that most readers would finish this poem with the question "Who did this?!" One examines the clues: given the scenarios of other poems in Ariel, e.g., the house, the nursery, the backyard, the kitchen ("Cut," in fact, follows "The Jailor" in Ariel's original ordering of poems), as well as the scene of domesticity alluded to with "breakfast plate," this prison must be a house/home. Given that this victimizer as a "he" who presides over this domestic domain, one automatically thinks of the traditional "head of household, " the father/ husband. At this point, if one chooses to read Plath's poems as autobiographical, in a narrow sense of the word, who else could one point to but the husband of Sylvia Plath and the father of her children, Ted Hughes? If the reader takes his/her role seriously as a juror/detective/ prosecutor, accusations and defamations ensue. (Of course, one can do this with other poems of Plath's where the pronoun "he" or "you"

is used to accuse someone of a serious infraction or crime). The most famous example of this type of reading is found in Robin Morgan's poem "The Arraignment." In the first stanza, Morgan writes:

> How can I accuse
> Ted Hughes
> of what the entire British and American
> literary and critical establishment
> has been at great lengths to deny,
> without ever saying it in so many words, of course:
> the murder of Sylvia Plath.
> (Morgan)

The accusations do not stop there and, as Sarah Churchwell points out, the poem proceeds to also condemn Hughes for

> mind-rape and body-rape, infidelity,
> abduction and brainwashing of her
> children, plagiarism of her imagery,
> hiding of her most revealing indictments against her jailor,
> [and] making a mint by becoming her posthumous editor[,]
> (Morgan as excerpted by Churchwell 15)

Clearly, Morgan is a reader who has proceeded along the path of logic outlined above: The Jailor is Ted Hughes. One might go through the other poems and find supporting evidence for this claim:

> I felt a still busyness, an intent.
> I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
> Ringing the white china.
> How they awaited him, those little deaths!
> They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.
> ("The Rabbit Catcher")
>
> …
> The scald scar of water,
> The nude
> Verdigris of the condor.
> I am red meat. His beak
>
> Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.

…
The dew makes a star.
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.
(Death & Co)

…
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong
…
(The Detective)

Let us return to the questions posed earlier: Why does the reader wants to identify "you/the perpetrator?" Why does s/he want or need to know? Why does s/he implicate herself in the courtroom drama? Those questions, themselves, point to the problem of trying to answer the question, "Who did it?" rather than reflecting on why we pose them in the first place. The reader is better served to phrase the question this way, "Whodunnit?" so we can remind ourselves as readers that it is *we* who have entered a space where "The air is a mill of hooks--/ questions without answers." If one follows the original ordering of poems in Ariel, "The Jailor" is placed only two poems before "The Detective" which reminds us of the "Whodunnit?" lure.

The first stanza of "The Detective" creates a scenario where a speaker is trying to solve a crime through standard lines of questioning:

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

What is important to the speaker of this poem is "what was she doing?" To the reader of this poem, however, another question overrides this one, a question prompted by that pronoun without an antecedent "it." "What is *it*?" We can only assume that, using Plath's

own words, "*It* is important." The poem, however, proceeds without answering that particular question and moves on to describe "that valley." "It" appears four stanzas later where the poem continues to refuse us a referent; instead, the poem seems to only acknowledge the futility of its own line of questioning:

> Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
> Which of the poisons is it?
> Which of the nerve curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?
> This is a case without a body.
> The body does not come into it at all.

The poem ends by insisting that there is no physical evidence but, instead, reminds us what we are doing and where we are, as readers -- in a poem that has appropriated the form of a whodunit:

> …
> We walk on air, Watson.
> There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
> There is only a crow in a tree.

"The Detective," poses a series of questions linked to what seems to be the predicament of a murder case. There is a scene for the crime, there is a killer (whose eyes "move sluglike and sidelong") and there is "it," the pronoun without antecedent, the defining "thing" which begins the poem but which is never defined: "It" is that which only ever wants investigation. "It" is always a question because it can't be bodily substantiated. Although the poem insists on a crime and a killer there is no evidence but signs of happy domesticity:

> There is no body in the house at all.
> There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
> There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
> Bored hoodlum in a red room
> Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

I would suggest that this lack of a "body" is the key to understanding the kind of lyric subjectivity Plath's poetry investigates. The hooks which pull us into the poem ultimately deny us anything substantive. Plath's poems offer us the costume of femininity but no woman, no female body is there except the one we readers give to it. Rose's choice of words "haunting" is appropriate for this reason – because if there is a body, it is one resurrected, constructed by the readers, the disclaimers, the blamers and the fans.

Reading Plath's poetry, then, is like trying to solve a mystery without a solution, or a riddle which has no answer. Consider Plath's poem, "Metaphors."

> I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.
> O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
> This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
> Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
> I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
> I've eaten a bag of green apples,
> Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The poem announces itself as a riddle: "I'm a riddle in nine syllables" and, indeed, each line of this 9-line poem is 9 syllables. What do we do with riddles? We solve them, yes, but first we reflect upon them, ponder them, consider the linguistic architecture while looking for hints, possibilities: "An elephant, a ponderous house." Is a riddle as large and weighty as this? How did something so small accumulate such heft, cast such a large shadow? Imagine a hand taking on the forms of animals: a bunny, a rabbit, a deer. Here the poem's gesture is the same as that hand – it shapes itself, it casts a shadow, it asks its viewer to look at the shadow and see a recognizable shape projected from the hand's contortion. We move from the animal to the inorganic to fruit then fruit, ivory, timber.

We vacillate between the organic and the inorganic, the conscious and the unconscious. This is not "metaphor" (singular). This is metaphors, plural, and the poem shifts fluidly from one to another. There is a common thread among these metaphors and that is the sense of a large container (ile, house, fat purse, cow) containing something that develops, accumulates, rises, churns, or even upsets (as in the stomach): red fruit, yeast rising, money, a calf, green apples. If I create a picture based on the one anthropomorphism and the one active verb in the poem – a melon strolling on two tendrils Strolling tendrils = thin legs. Above this a melon, a pregnant woman? Aha, I have solved the riddle – it is a pregnant woman! That is what the metaphors describe. "I" is a pregnant woman, a cow in calf. However, to rest with this feeling of closure is clearly a mistake given that a sense of finality eludes the poem, itself. The last line insists on a perpetual journeying where "there's no getting off:"

> I've eaten a bag of green apples,
> Boarded the train there's no getting off.

I suggest we consider this statement as how Plath the poet positions her lyric voice. She is an illusory body, the body for metaphors, an object to be compared with flowers, fruit, animals. She is the feminine nature, the "speaking" face of earth. How does she speak with no voice? She speaks by gestural transformation, mining against a white wall. This is the "body" that Sylvia Plath gives her lyric subject, her emoting "I" – a self that "speaks" through the gestures of change and transformation. It entices us with a riddle but beware the answer because this body will not reside in one – it merely shows them changing. It's easy to come away from this poem seeing a pregnant woman as a metaphor for the poem's metaphors but this is not the case. It's more subtle than that. There is, ultimately, no answer, no birth scene, no baby, and no body. The pregnant

woman is a projection among projections – one of the many roles Plath inhabits in her poems.

What is offered and denied in Plath's work, then, is a human body and a human voice. Mouths, tongues, lips, throats appear everywhere throughout Plath's work but what's significant about this is that they always appear in a context where communication can't happen on a vocal level. Mouths are stopped, stuffed. Tongues are caught in barbed wire. Lips are sealed in a smile. Throats are choked. The only vehicle for communication is the gesture and Plath's primary gesture in her late work, as was discussed earlier, is that of exaggeration, hyperbole, overstatement. John Berryman's Henry introduces his "Dream Songs" with the statement "What I have to say is a long wonder the world can bear and be." Sylvia's talking dolls can't say this. They can only parrot and mimic. Moments of lyric voice happen only when there is no semantic utterance, when the vocative must communicate *something* it can't communicate: it cries, shrieks, hisses, yowls, purrs, buzzes. And indeed, if one examines Plath's work closely, one will see that it is full of not only script-speak, but unintelligible animal sounds and baby sounds. Here are some examples:

> The pure gold baby
> That melts to a shriek.
> ("Lady Lazarus")
>
> I am inhabited by a cry.
>
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking, with its hooks for something to love.
> ("Elm")
>
> Of two wet eyes and a screech.
> White spit

Of indifference!
("Thalidomide")

The world purrs, shut-off and gentle,
With a goddamn baby screaming off somewhere.
There's always a bloody baby in the air.
I'd call it a sunset, but
Whoever heard a sunset yowl like that?
("Stopped Dead")

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss.
("Lesbos")

The sea, that crystallized these,
Creeps away, many-snaked, with a long hiss of distress.
("Berck-Plage")

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements
…
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's…
…
…And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.
("Morning Song")

To revise Henry's (of John Berryman's Dream Songs) statement to one that would fit Plath's illusory, constructed body is "What I have to say is that I can't say." Of course, it should be noted that all poetry to some extent makes this gesture, that but what's particular to Plath's work is where she locates that struggle as the problem inherent in becoming a representable female subject, the bartering for a body. A female body doesn't speak; it "talk, talk, talks" much like a parrot mimics or a baby cries.

Plath's poetry appropriates a male script of impersonal surveillance and object-making and shows how that script works with regards to her own lyric subjectivity. As much blood, gore, and body parts as there are in Plath's poetry, there is no body. Becoming a representable "I" in the case of feminine presences involves repression and destruction of what could properly be constituted as a subject. It is only Plath's audience which insists on finding the speaker in the script. Revising Life and certain other feminist readings of Plath's work attempt to find some kind of redemption in Plath's manipulation of scripts, but to find that redemption in Plath's work is to deny its significance and its assertion that the voice has never asserted itself. It has gestured but not spoken. It is about hands casting shadows not about speaking. It is about a carnival, a show of lights, the "smoke and mirrors" of poetic effects deployed through the mechanical dolls. If there is a true lyric subject in Plath's work, she hasn't said anything. What she's shown you are the mechanisms in place that don't allow her to speak. The face she can take on is not a speaking one – not one with a human voice. She can take on faces and she can mimic voices. She can make animal sounds – shrieks, hisses, grunts – but what she cannot do is speak in a recognizable representable form.

Chapter 3 -- Seeing as "Reading" in Anne Carson's Poetry

3.1 Images and the Imagination

Although Carson's language often seems clear and direct (As Mark Scroggins has stated "Carson's lines have a ruthless clarity, a simplicity that is sometimes graceful Shaker and sometimes just plain rude Puritan(9)), her images are only ever deceptively so. Where Plath's images are vivid and accumulate in a poem like solid and sharply-defined building blocks, Carson's images have a tendency to blur or mutate through the course of a poem; they are often instable elements which disrupt or confuse distinct categories or totalizing pictures, making the reader aware of the process of visualizing as s/he reads. In Dreaming by the Book, Elaine Scarry explains how literature typically conducts a reader's visualization process: literature is able to tap into our imagination by reproducing the deep structure of perception, dictating to us (without our awareness) how and what to visualize in the mind's eye. According to Scarry, "literature consists of a steady stream of erased imperatives" (35) to create mental pictures Carson's work, however, makes the reader aware of these imperatives and the process through which she creates images by providing directions and details which add up to a conflicted or fragmented "whole." Thus, while Plath's subject operates within the world of fixed images and forms, calling our attention to its crippling effects through dramatic amplification, Carson's subject stands in the margins of representation where words become or don't become images. Plath's lyric subject occupies the realm of images; Carson's remain in the fabric of the imagination.

A point of comparison could be made, first of all, between how Carson and Plath render the female body. Plath's bodies are surgical, mechanical, de-humanized images

manipulated by the society which engenders them. The genius of Plath's work is that her poetics exposes through ironic theatricality, the aesthetic of this cruelty and the cruelty of this aesthetic. Plath facets brilliant images but also shows the knife that cuts them into their appealing shapes, the knife that disappears or dissects a human body. For example, as was discussed in the previous section, with the poem, "Cut," Plath shows the productive results of a mind-body disassociation; instead of responding emotionally or physically to the cut she makes to her thumb she, instead, celebrates it as an opportunity to generate a myriad of metaphors: "What a thrill--/ My thumb instead of an onion./ The top quite gone/ Except for a sort of a hinge/ of skin." (CP 235) At the same time, the cruelty and violence of this mind-body disassociation is inscribed in the poem with references to scalping, the revolutionary war, the Ku Klux Klan, and the suicidal Kamikaze pilots. Plath's poem,"The Surgeon at 2 a.m" also showcases the aesthetics of disassociation. The speaker in this poem is the surgeon and he explains his perspective on the bodies on which he operates:

> The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful.
> The body under it is in my hands.
> As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white
> With seven holes thumbed in. The soul is another light.
> I have not seen it… (CP 170)

To the surgeon, bodies are objects and not human beings. However, just as in "Cut," this disassociation from the body enables a multiplicity in metaphor-making: "It is a garden I have to do with – tubers and fruits/ Oozing their jammy substances, a mat of roots" and "This is the lung-tree. These orchids are splendid. The spot and coil like snakes. / The heart is a red-bell bloom, in distress." (CP 171) The poem's scalpel cuts the body at the same time that it generates the substance of the poem.

The body in Carson's poem, however, can never be broken so easily into distinct sections or parts. A good example of Carson's depiction of bodies can be found in her long poem, "The Glass Essay," a poem narrated by a female speaker who contemplates her life and solitude in the aftermath of a failed relationship. One of the motifs in "The Glass Essay" is a series of "nudes" which appear intermittently to the speaker:

> Each morning a vision came to me.
> Gradually I understood that these were naked glimpses of my soul.
>
> I called them Nudes. (GIG 9)

Carson's nudes might initially appear as stark as Plath's mechanical bodies. However, there are crucial differences. Carson's nudes are fluid, changing over time, and Carson numbers them as they occur to her. The nudes never solidify into a doll, a part, a sculpture or a thing because they are constantly multiplying and changing. Moreover, the nudes are not pre-existing objects or things; they are "naked glimpses of my soul" -- illustrations of the speaker's state of mind. Thus, although nudes as a genre are pictographic objectifications of women's bodies (following Berger's theory that "A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude" (54)), Carson takes us into the process of objectification and re-scripts it in order to show us the "naked." Writes Berger, "To be naked is to be oneself…Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (54).

When the Nudes first appear in "The Glass Essay," their imagistic quality echoes the ambience created in the poem up until this point. Their postures are tortured, fractured, pierced, battered. They are painfully and confrontationally stark. The speaker describes them as "clear in my mind / as pieces of laundry that froze on the clothesline overnight." What is particularly disturbing about the nudes is that they are "voiceless"

images, ones which don't verbalize the suffering which they so clearly portray. In re-envisioning these nudes, the speaker, thereby, addresses the pain of the *incommunicability* of pain.

> Nude #1. Woman alone on a hill.
> She stands into the wind.
>
> It is a hard wind slanting from the north.
> Long flaps and shreds of flesh rip off the woman's body and lift
> and blow away on the wind, leaving
>
> an exposed column of nerve and blood and muscle
> calling mutely through lipless mouth.
> It pains me to record this. (GIG 9)

These initial nudes, numbered from one to four seem to depict feminine bodies as objects and as objects, they do not act of their own accord. Instead, they are acted upon. However, it is not the male spectator or subject which is acting on these subjects; it is "nature:"

> Nude #2 Woman caught in a cage of thorns.
> Big glistening brown thorns with black stains on them
> where she twists this way and that way
>
> unable to stand upright.
> Nude #3. Woman with a single great thorn implanted in her forehead.
> She grips it in both hands
>
> endeavouring to wrench it out.
> Nude #4. Woman on a blasted landscape
> backlit in red like Hieronymus Bosch.
>
> covering her head and upper body is a hellish contraption
> like the top half of a crab,
> With arms cross as if pulling off a sweater
>
> she works hard at dislodging the crab. (GIG 17-18)

The Christic "thorns" as well as the Bosch-like version of hell move the context of these nudes away from mimetic representation and toward the context of allegory. Nudity,

here, does not have a referent; it has an interpretation. This presentation of nudity as belonging to the realm of allegory rather than the realm of representation exposes nudity as a scripted convention rather than a depiction of an *a priori* reality; however, this does not detract from the power of these images within the speaker's imagination or their status as inescapable imprints, ones that cannot be easily dismissed or undone through questions. When the speaker tells her therapist, "Dr. Haw," about the nudes, it becomes clear that the speaker cannot disregard these images.

> …She [Dr. Haw] said,
> When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them?
> why keep watching? why not
>
> go away? I was amazed.
> Go away where? I said.
> this still seems to me a good question (GIG 18)
>
> …
> Why keep watching?
> Some people watch, that's all I can say.
> there is nowhere else to go,
>
> no ledge to climb up to. (GIG 19)

The essential difference between Carson's Nudes and Plath's bodies is that Carson nudes are not depicted as dead or hollow representations but as substantial acts of the imagination. While the speaker characterizes the first four nudes as images frozen in her mind, the images themselves do not depict mechanical dolls, artificial limbs, or anesthetized bodies; they are images of struggle, of movement, and of flesh, bone, and blood. The organic features of the Nudes becomes more pronounced with Nude #5, after the speaker announces, "I am my own Nude:" With these images it is not simply the nude which is made of flesh; the very context and fabric of re-presenting is, itself, presented as a kind of flesh.

> Nude #5. Deck of cards.
> Each card is made of flesh.
>
> The living cards are days of a woman's life.
> I see a great silver needle go flashing right through the deck once from end to end.
> …
> Nude #7. White room whose walls,
> having neither planes nor curves nor angles,
> are composed of a continuous satiny white membrane
>
> like the flesh of some interior organ of the moon.
> It is a living surface, almost wet.
> Lucency breathes in and out.
>
> Rainbows shudder across it.
> And around the walls of the room a voice goes whispering,
> Be very careful. Be very careful. (GIG 35)

Generally, one considers a playing card as a kind of paper/cardboard upon which is imprinted a standard set of images and numbers. Here, Carson, not only erases the distinction between medium and imprint, but she resists an instinct to collapse individual parts into a whole. *Each* card is made of flesh; *each* one is penetrated by a silver needle. Time, here, is not an abstraction; it is a substance composed of individual sensitivities that cannot be conflated into a single standardized image. Nude #7 accentuates this insistence on medium as substance, by presenting us with a context that has no figure. It is, furthermore, not a background waiting for a figure or substance to be imprinted upon it. "Composed of a continuous satiny white membrane, // like the flesh of some interior organ of the moon" the context asserts itself as textural organic presence. As Sophie Mayer in her article, "Picture Theory: On Photographic Intimacy in Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson," argues, Nude #7 removes us from the dynamic of spectatorship by taking us inside vision itself. According to Brossard, "The white room is the inside of an eye, a reversal of the ocularcentric hegemony asserted by Emerson's 'transparent

eyeball'"(110). The poem's allusions to the moon, often identified as a feminine symbol, and to madness (if one thinks of the white room as a padded cell in a sanatorium), a psychological state identified closely with women, render this vision as a feminine one. Carson substantiates a feminized vision rather than a feminized figure: "Whiteness, wetness, lunacy, and lucency seal the poet inside seeing" (Mayer 110).

The final nude appears to the speaker at the end of The Glass Essay and does something that none of the others seems able to do. It presents a figure who is able to move outside the gendering gaze; a figure who can transform from an objectified female body into an instrument of subjective experience.

> Nude #13 arrived when I was not watching for it.
> It came at night.
>
> Very much like Nude #1.
> And yet utterly different.
> I saw a high hill and on it a form shaped against hard air.
>
> It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
> but as I came closer
> I saw it was a human body
>
> trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off the bones.
> And there was no pain.
> The wind
>
> was cleansing the bones.
> They stood forth silver and necessary.
> It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.
> It walked out of the light. (GIG 38)

For the first time in Carson's poem, a "nude" is put into motion, unimpeded by traps, thorns, cages, or cocoons. Just as significantly, the nude moves "out of the light;" it is no longer a body framed by the gaze for investigation or inquiry.

The difference between Carson's and Plath's interrogation of subjectivity and specularity can be framed by comparing Plath's version of Lazarus with Carson's. Both Carson in "TV Men: Lazarus," and Plath in "Lady Lazarus," mock conventions of specularity. Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" draws attention to the predicament of a woman trying to speak in the context of specularity. Plath's poem approaches specularity from the perspective of the objectified female figure, a figure which does not have the option to "walk out of the light" as a living subject. In Plath's poem, the female subject can only truly "speak" through ironic hyperbole, reiterating the script that reinforces her status as a visual object. Her presence in the public eye ("the crowds shoved into see") denies genuine subjective expression. She becomes, instead, a product of consumer culture and male spectatorship. Plath alludes to this commercialization of the feminine figure by using the word "charge" in her poem, alluding to not only the thrill/ excitement projected by a carnival girl-show, but its status as a money-making enterprise:

> There is a charge
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart
> …
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood (CP 246)

The speaker does not express herself in Lady Lazarus; rather she exposes the instrument of oppression which causes her self-destruction. Although the dissolution of the body into ash may seem to find a form of redemption in the final stanza's allusion to a phoenix, it must be noted *how* the phoenix reappears:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware.
> Beware.

> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like ear. (CP 246-247)

As Kathleen Margaret Lant points out in her article "The Big Strip Tease: Female bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath" this is an empty threat:

> At the very end…she resorts to descriptions of her appearance – her red hair- but not delineations of her reality – her anger. She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous for she must offer the female body as an object rather than assert it as a weapon. (Lant 654)

Rather, as Alicia Ostriker notes, the hollowness of this incantation invites pity more than it does fear:

> She is impersonating a female Phoenix-fiend like a woman wearing a Halloween costume, or a child saying "I'll kill you" to the grownups, or Lear bellowing "I will do such things -- / What they are yet I know/ not, but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth." She is powerless, she knows it, she hates it. (102)

The subject of Lady Lazarus never, ultimately, transcends the script specularity has created for her.

Anne Carson's "TV Men: Lazarus"[20] also tackles the problem of subjective expression within the context of specularity, but the poem works from a different

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[20] "TV Men" is a longer series of poems that includes "Antigone (Scripts 1 and 2)" which juxtaposes Antigone's pre-edited takes with edited ones, and "TV Men: Artaud" which dissects elements of Artaud's life and work into a film schedule that spans a week.

perspective – "offstage" so to speak where the script can be negotiated. In Carson's poem the speaker/subject is a "Director of Photography" (gender undesignated) who muses on the subject of his/her documentary (Lazarus). In Plath's poem, the speaker/subject cannot move outside the realm of what is on display; she is caught within the script which portrays her as the specular object. While Carson's poem frames itself as an intent to display and portray, the rambling reflective nature of the director's "voiceover" and "shooting script" ironically indicate what *will not be* and *cannot be* captured on film. The epigraph of the poem makes this inevitability clear: "TV Makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from *videre* , 'to see' (Longinus, *de Sublimate*, 5.3)."[21] (MOH 61) In the first part of the poem, "Director of Photography: Voiceover" the director explains her[22] choice of subject matter and what, ultimately, she hopes to capture in her documentary. Her explanation, however, resists visualizing. While she waxes philological ("The name Lazarus is an abbreviated form of Hebrew 'El'azar,/ meaning 'God has helped'"(MOH 88)), philosophical ("I have grasped certain fundamental notions first advanced by Plato, / e.g. that our reality is just a TV set // inside a TV set inside a TV set, with nobody watching" (MOH 89)), and literary ("…Some people think Lazarus lucky, // like Samuel Beckett who calls him 'Happy Larry' or Rilke / who speaks of / that moment in a game / when 'the pure too-little flips over into the empty too-much" (MOH 90)), the director's explanation never segues into actual

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[21] This is actually a fabricated quote. There is no section 5.3 to Longinus' essay on the Sublime.

[22] I use "she" even though there is no gender designated for the Director of Photography in the poem.

description or "scriptable" material. Even when the director indicates she is getting "back on track," ("But now I see my assistant producer waving her arms / at me to get / on with the script" (MOH 88) she only launches into another sequence of reflections that don't fit within the parameters of storyboarding.

The director intends to capture the miraculous magnitude of what she calls the "flip-over moment" when Lazarus awakes from the dead. She describes the kind of mundane, historical footage she will avoid:

> You won't be seeing any clips from home videos of Lazarus
> in short pants racing his sisters up a hill.
>
> No footage of Mary and Martha side by side on the sofa
> discussing how they manage
> at home
>
> with a dead one sitting down to dinner. No panel of experts
> debating who was really the victim here. (MOH 90)

However, the poetry in the director's intentions and explanations are deflated by the sudden and humorous intervention of technological contrivance.

> Our sequence beings and ends with that moment of complete
> innocence
> and sport –
> when Lazarus licks the first drop of afterlife off the nipple
> of his own old death.
>
> I put tiny microphones all over the ground
> to pick up
> the magic
> of the vermin in his ten fingers and I stand back to wait
> for the miracle.[23] (MOH 91)

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[23] Interestingly, Mark Scroggins in his article, "Truth, Beauty, and Remote Control" had the opposite interpretation. He writes that "That final detail – "the vermin in his ten fingers" – succeeds, to some degree, in making the entire monologue come

The second part of the poem, "Lazarus Standup: Shooting Script" reinforces the disparity between the director's conceptualization and its deployment. If anything, it indicates what cannot be visually framed or "shot:"

> His bones are moving like a mist in him
> all blown to the surface then sideways.
> I do not want to see,
> he thinks in pain
> …
> …his soul congeals on his back in chrysolite drops
>
> which almost at once evaporate.
> …
> For the furniture shrank upon him as a bonework of
> not just volume but
> secret volume—
> where fingers go probing
> into drawers
> and under
> pried-up boxlids
>
> go rifling mute garments of white
>
> and memories are streaming from his mind to his heart—(MOH 93-94)

The moments the director wishes to capture are that which don't have a clear perceptible equivalent: the desire to not see, the soul, the "secret volume" of memories. Although the description of Lazarus' awakening and delayed response to the call of his sister's voice could accommodate a script's notion of "scene" (since it posits characters in a

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alive, redeeming it from the director's irredeemable vulgarity (not to mention the flat, prosaic lines in which he speaks). " However, I don't think Carson's poem makes a negative judgment on its speaker since her own description of making a documentary in an interview with Stephen Burt echoes lines used by the director of photography in this poem (Burt 3-4).

situation where dialogue is exchanged), the poetic flourishes in this description[24] are not ones which could be captured on film. While the "shooting script" might aspire to capture the "magic" of a moment, the pragmatics of *shooting* clearly elude this magic.

> Lazarus!
> A froth of fire is upon his mind.
> It crawls to the back of his tongue,
> struggles a bit,
> cracking the shell
> and pushes out a bluish cry that passes at once to the soul.
> Martha!
>
> he cries, making a little scalded place
>
> on the billows of tomb that lap our faces as we watch.
> We know the difference now
> (life or death).
> For an instant it parts our hearts.
> Someone take the linen napkin off his face,
> says the director quietly. (MOH 94-95)

Moreover, Carson re-configures the miracle of Lazarus as one which does not depend upon the eye-witnessing of Lazarus' living body; the miracle, in fact, happens before this, before the director's cue to "take the linen napkin off his face." Vision or "witnessing" is indicated as the staged part of the scenario, the aftermath of the miracle. The miracle hinges upon the instrument of voice and the sense of hearing

> Lazarus
> (someone is calling his name) – his name!
> And at the name (which he knew)
> not just a roar of darkness

---

[24] Again, my reading of this second section was quite different from Scroggins. I found these poetic flourishes to be aesthetically appealing but he believes that the narration of being raised from the dead is "a tall order that Carson isn't quite up to. She falls into overheated metaphor, a hyperbolic miming of the 'blooming, buzzing confusion" of sensation… that leads to an embarrassing climax." (5)

the whole skeletal freight

of him
took pressure,
crushing him backward into the rut where he lay
like a damp
petal
under a pile of furniture

And the second fact of his humanity began. (MOH 93)

In Carson's poem, the distance between life and death is linked not by a cosmic force but by personal naming and by the intimacy of the voice which pulls its listener into a web of memories and personal associations. In Carson's, poem, it is not Jesus but Mary and Martha who pull him back from death. Consider how the poem proceeds

For the furniture shrank upon him as a bonework of
not just volume but
secret volume—
where fingers go probing
into drawers
and under
pried-up boxlids,

go rifling mute garments of white

and memories are streaming from his mind to his heart—
of someone standing at the door:
Of white breath in frozen air.
Mary. Martha. (MOH 93-94)

Carson's foregrounding of the voice and hearing as the vehicle of Lazarus' miracle almost seems to be a translation of a New Testament passage into an Old Testament philosophy. According to Blumenberg, in his article, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," the New Testament harmonized with Greek theory where "all certainty was based on visibility" (47). Blumenberg notes how the opposite is true for the Old Testament:

> For the Old Testament literature, however, and for the consciousness of truth it documents" writes Blumenberg, "seeing is always predetermined, put into question, or surpassed by hearing. The created is based on the Word, and in terms of its binding claim, the Word always precedes the created. The real reveals itself within a horizon of its signification, a horizon allocated by hearing. (46)

This is not to say that Carson's eschewal of the role of vision within the Lazarus miracle is an indication of religious preference; rather, it is an attempt to overcome the footholds of an ocularcentric perspective which began with Greek theory and which was later refined within Enlightenment thinking. In the enlightenment, according to Blumenberg,

> 'light' is thought of as being at man's disposal. Phenomena no longer stand in the light; rather they are subject to the lights of an examination from a particular perspective…It is the conditionality of perspective and the awareness of it, even the free selection of it, that now defines the concept of 'seeing.' (53)

It is not vision, itself, but the contrivance of "seeing" (and of our mistaking that for vision) which is at issue within Carson's Lazarus poem. In Plath's poem, the female subject can only truly "speak" through ironic hyperbole, reiterating the script that reinforces her status as a visual object. Her presence in the public eye ("the crowds shoved into see") denies her subjective expression. Anne Carson's "TV Men: Lazarus" also tackles the problem of subjective expression within the context of specularity but it does so by foregrounding the medium which shapes specularity, that which reinforces a public notion of what it means "to see." Carson investigates the medium of vision – in

this case, television -- by reflecting on how it mediates "vision," i.e., intent, desire, conceptualization. As a result, the reader "sees" how much of the conceptual "vision" is lost within the literalized vision of a documentary television program. Carson's poem also exposes the reader to the magnitude and power of what is not seen, of the connections forged by intimacy and "secret volumes" of memories that connect life and death while still remind them of the distance between them, those instances which "part our hearts."

Carson's work, then, challenges a conceptual "vision" that is strictly *informed and formed* by a literal or post-enlightenment notion of "vision." Although Carson's writing is very much engaged with visual media,[25] her concept of what constitutes vision is more complicated than these media might seem to indicate. Many of her poems in Men in the Off Hours seem to offer the kind of critique Merleau-Ponty delivers in his earlier essay, *Eye and Mind*:

> Science manipulates things and gives up living in them… Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as through it were an object-in-general – as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use. (159)

Her poem "Freud (1st draft)," for example, mocks the idea that theories of sexuality and gender could be based solely on the powers of observation and scientific reasoning.

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[25] Carson's work references film, photography, television, plays, opera, and dance.

According to the poem, Freud "spent the summer of 1876 in Trieste/ researching hermaphroditism in eels." (MOH 20) Although Freud is able to determine the sexuality of eels by the visual presence or absence of testicles ("'All the eels I have cut open are of the tenderer sex,' / he reported after the first 400" (MOH 20)), these powers of discrimination are completely ineffective, moot in fact, when it applies to an actual engagement of sexuality: "Meanwhile // the 'young goddesses' of Trieste were proving unapproachable." (MOH 20) Carson's poem suggests that Freud's notion of gender as the visual presence or absence of specific genitalia not only prevents real knowledge or insight into sexuality and gender relations; it suggests that this occlusion is the result of a visual-centric methodology which depends upon detached observation and therefore can't account for personal experience or subjective interactions:

> Since
> it is not permitted
> to dissect human beings I have
> in fact nothing to do with them," he confided in a letter. (MOH 20)

Carson's work, then, shows how scientific observation, in trying to fix and identify referents within the visible world, ends up impeding our connection to the world. "Audubon," provides another example of Carson's critique of scientific vision, illustrating how the desire to visually capture the essence or light or mystery of a thing actually destroys that very essence.

> Audubon perfected a new way of drawing birds that he called his.
> On the bottom of each watercolor he put "drawn from nature"
> which meant he shot the birds
>
> and took them home to stuff and paint them. (MOH 17-18)

Carson indicates that Audubon's rendering of birds has more to do with the desire to possess than to observe. He called this way of drawing "his," he shot the birds and "took

them home." So the irony of "drawn from nature" becomes clear. Although in a literal context "drawn" refers to the artistry of sketching, Carson's reading of "drawn" foregrounds the word's meaning of "taken." Audubon's way of representing birds took birds "out" of nature and out of a living existence so that they could be observable objects. In this way, the super-realism of Audubon's drawings ends up representing not life, but a life that was lost: "nature morte"

> Audubon colors dive in through your retina
> like a searchlight
> roving shadowlessly up and down the brain
>
> until you turn away.
> And you do turn away.
> There is nothing to see.

You can look at these true shapes all day and not see the bird. (MOH 17)

Carson's work asks us to question the ready-made picture that might appear in our mind's eye and re-engage the process of visualization, the process by which we imagine another being, place, or thing into existence, the process that Susan Stewart describes, in her book Poetry and the Fate of the Senses, as the task of all poetry: "It will be the argument of this book that cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry to counter the oblivion of darkness." (1-2). Carson makes the reader aware of the *giving* of this form by interrupting or loosening a quick link between language and visualization. Although poetry has always relied on the variety of senses – as Stewart notes, "*poeisis* as figuration relies on the senses of touching, seeing, and hearing that are central to the encounter with the presence of others" (3) -- Carson asks her reader to rely on these other senses and as well as other forms of cognitive processing to access *images,* to function with the kind of "sight" attributed to Geryon in Autobiography of Red:

> …he began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came
> roaring across the garden at him.
> He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing
> against
> the window screen. Most
> of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not
> hear
> the cries of the roses
> being burned alive in the noonday sun. *Like horses*, Geryon would say
> helpfully,
> *like horses in war*. No, they shook their heads.
> Why is grass called blades? he asked them. Isn't it because of the
> clicking? (AR 84)

What makes the imagery vivid in this passage is how it "appears" to Geryon. The roses in the garden do not occur to him as a decorative finish but as a bold and poignant outcry of color and difference. When he sees roses, he hears them crying as if "being burned alive in the noonday sun… like horses in war." Of course, this simile accosts more than one's sense of hearing if one smells burnt flesh and singed horsehair, or if one experiences the chill of absolute horror in thinking of this and other brutal facts one associates with war.[26] It is passages such as these which have prompted Stuart J. Murray to argue that "Carson's poetry is a beautiful instance of phenomenological synesthesia." (111) Murray, following Merleau-Ponty's theories of synesthesia, summarizes this experience as one where "the senses are always potentially cross-signifying, so that vision might be configured as touch, or a taste might resonate with a particular sound" (110).

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[26] Monique Tschofen shows how this passage also connects with vision with visual aesthetic history: "Within the frame of modern art, the phrase 'horses in war' conjures Pablo Picasso's painting of the agony of the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* (1937), just as the dramatic movements of silver crashing against the screen evoke the swirling motions in Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889)" (45).

Carson's poems do not always display or portray synesthetic "seeing"; they sometimes demand that the reader see this way in order to "make sense" of the poem, as is the case with "First Chaladaic Oracle"

> There is something you should know
> And the right way to know it
> is by a cherrying of your mind.
>
> Because if you press your mind towards it
> and try to know that thing
> as you know a thing, you will not know it…
>
> The way to know it
> is not by staring hard.
>
> But keep chiseled
> keep Praguing the eye… (MOH 10-11)

The way the poem interchanges nouns and verbs using such phrases as "cherrying of your mind, "Scorch is not the way to know, "Flamepit out everything," frustrates a reader's attempt to visualize a distinct subject, object, and process. And then there is that imperative to "Keep Praguing the eye." Praguing the eye? What does this mean? Is there something about Prague (perhaps its architecture?) which would help me understand what this word, "Praguing" means? The answer to this question is imbedded in the poem's text: "if you press your mind towards It / and try to know that thing / as you know a thing / You will not know it." It was only when I stopped trying to visualize "praguing the eye" that I realized how much this sounded like "prodding the eye." Carson's construction of "vision" mirrors Cathy Caruth's model for reference in "The Falling Body and the Impact of Reference, "reference emerges not in its accessibility to perception, but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies" (90) and I believe that this is what Carson encourages us to do, to use language to question what we see and

to examine *how* we see it. Seeing in this way is less about "picturing" or creating a series images in the mind's eye – a kind of seeing which posits a beholder who visually appropriates and classifies its "objects" – than it is about interpreting and interacting – a seeing which "reads" rather than fixes and identifies.

3.2 Autobiography as Reading/ Revision

Using the theater analogy, Plath's lyric subject is very much like an actor – always on-stage within the glare of theater lights, acting out pre-written scripts for existing as a woman. According to this thesis, subjective expression is found more easily in the gestures of Plath's poems (i.e., exaggeration, overstatement, irony, excess of rhyme) than in the words themselves. Carson's lyric subject is different than Plath's as she is one who deliberately walks off-stage, much like the "nude" who walks "out of the light" to become a genderless outsider. Carson's subject does not act. To preserve the theater analogy, we might cast her lyric subject in the role of a director, a stagehand, a costume designer, a scene painter, anyone who tries on different roles to alter the presentation or interpretation of the script. Carson's subject does not act or narrate her own drama nor does she act in one fabricated for her. Rather she constructs her sense of self by translating, reading, interpreting, or revising the ones that exist. Carson's lyric subject is perpetually moving outside of herself to re-examine and re-shape the context through which she appears.

The subject in Carson's work is always marked by a distancing from what constitutes him/herself.[27] The "I" consistently recedes from a historical/biographical referent, including one that is directly connected to Anne Carson herself. Anne Carson, the author, makes a significant gesture in this effort by resisting the public's access to any definitive representation of herself. She avoids being photographed and she avoids personal questions. When she does answer personal questions she tells her interviewers that they can't rely on this information because she lies. (McNeilly 1). The result is that subjectivity in Carson's is not defined by a particular identity or a search for the "true self," but, rather, by a repeated resistance to and withdrawal from fixed narratives or characteristics. "I" is read, translated, located through the distortions of the cultural script. Where Plath poetry shows and exposes the process and results of becoming representable subject, Carson's seems to deliberately delay and confuse that process so that there is no conclusive or easily perceived reference to a "true life" or "true story." This is not to say that Carson's style lacks warmth or a pulse; it is simply that that heartbeat can't be centralized in a specific representation.

I would argue that the instability of Carson's lyric subject is a reflection of a particularly feminine struggle, a struggle to define subjectivity/self in a cultural and historical context which renders women as objects and others. In What Does a Woman Want?, Shoshana Felman explains that this is why she would suggest that "none *of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*:"

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[27] Even Nox**,** which contains personal photographs and fragments of letters, must navigate through the translation of Catullus' elegy to frame Carson's own elegy.

> Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story. (14)

Felman identifies the difficulty of a woman trying to write the story of "self" as a confrontation with the realization that she has no story. However, Felman claims, that the very act of confronting this absence through our engagement with texts can be a productive means toward realizing a story:

> And it cannot *become* a story except through the *bond of reading*… I will here propose that we might be able to engender, or to access, our story only indirectly – by conjugating literature, theory and autobiography together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture, at once our sexual difference and our autobiography as missing. (14)

It is exactly this kind of story – the story of self that cannot be written but must be read through a "conjugat[ion] [of] literature, theory and autobiography" – which Carson tells in her long poem, "The Glass Essay." "The Glass Essay" might be indexed as an autobiographical account – a confessional poem or personal essay which expresses, however tersely, the grief and loneliness at the end of a love affair – but the autobiographical index, "I," occupies a problematic position in the text. With its often exaggerated critical detachment and a scientism typified by an obsession with numbers and arbitrary markers of time, "The Glass Essay" resists the pleasures of autobiography, the potential polysemy of "I" and its ability" to flesh out or contribute personal dimension

to the role of author. Though "The Glass Essay" "narrates" in the first-person, the "I" of the poem only manages to write "her own story" only by reflecting off, meandering from, or conflating its details with the "story" of Emily Bronte. However one finds in Bronte's story the same estrangement of story which led her to it. All the movements of "I's" story echo the objective narrator's repeated self-exclusion.

Although "The Glass Essay" frequently cites Bronte's Wuthering Heights, the poem never refers to the figure of Mr. Lockwood. I would argue however, that Mr. Lockwood's role in Wuthering Heights unlocks how and why Bronte's novel haunts Carson's poem: both yield a similar trajectory for "self" in presenting an "I" who refers not to a "being" but to an agent of difference or division. Mr. Lockwood only active gesture in the course of Bronte's novel is to detach himself from any authorial or dramatic presence. Although he is, technically, a first-person narrator, he conspicuously effaces his own subjectivity and withdraws from, for the significant portion of the novel, narrative authority. The character-figure of Mr. Lockwood is, borrowing Julia Kristeva's terminology, Wuthering Heights' "deject" or "exile," one who is neither subject nor other, whose only active verb of being is a repeated exclusion from the time and diegesis of narrative:

> a deject… places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging or refusing. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes… casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations… (Kristeva, 9)

All of Mr. Lockwood's motives and moves are characterized by a desire to divide and detach himself from the other characters and their stories, and his act of "straying" is a conspicuously repeated dramatic event in the novel. Mr. Lockwood's desire to escape, for example, "the stir of society" and move to the northern moors of England opens the novel: "1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord… In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven." (1) He reinforces this misanthropic persona when he recounts, in the first chapter, an incident from his past: he fell in love with a woman, "a real goddess in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me," but "when she understood him at last and looked a return he shrunk icily into himself like a snail: at every glance retired colder and father" (Chapter 1, 24). Mr. Lockwood repeats this "retreat" when he recoils from the ghost of Catherine Linton in Chapter Three. Unable to release the "ice-cold hand" of Catherine Linton (clinging to his through a broken window and sobbing "Let me in! Let me in!"), he reacts violently:

> …finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes… 'Let me go, if you want me to let you in!' The fingers relaxed, I snatched mine through the hole, hurriedly piled the books up in a pyramid against it, and stopped my ears to exclude the lamentable prayer… 'Begone!' I shouted. 'I'll never let you in, not if you beg for twenty years.' (Chapter 3, 43)

This violent performance of Mr. Lockwood's precipitates a turning point in the novel: his shouting, his frenzied "recoiling" awakes Heathcliff who, upon discovering his

guest's source of anxiety, executes the exact opposite course of action, pursuing rather than recoiling from the ghost at the window:

> He got on to the bed, and wrenched open the lattice, bursting, as he pulled at it, into an uncontrollable passion of tears. 'Come in! come in!' he sobbed. 'Cathy do come. Oh, do – once more! Oh! my heart's darling! Hear me this time, Catherine, at last!' (Chapter 3, 46)

The amorous figure and the anti-amorous figure, here, are inextricably linked, for Mr. Lockwood's frenzied performance doesn't simply "wake" Heathcliff; it wakes the reader to the amorous division and desolation which shape the plot of Wuthering Heights. In breaking the window then drawing Catherine's blood on the shard, Mr. Lockwood marks and characterizes the division between Catherine and Heathcliff.

When Lockwood performs retreat, once again, by retiring to his sickbed this, too, serves as a turning point in the novel, for it is only after Lockwood has abandoned his authorial voice, that the (his) story of Catherine and Heathcliff comes to light. For the significant portion of the novel, from Chapter Four up until Chapter Thirty-One (the book ends on Chapter Thirty-Four), the reader might imagine (though she is rarely prompted to imagine) Mr. Lockwood lying in bed with a serious illness, listening to the story of Catherine and Heathcliff as it is told by its almost-omniscient witness, Nelly. A narrator of the narrated, Mr. Lockwood recedes from his first-pronoun status and becomes merely the implied quotation marks around Nelly's recounting of events.

Mr. Lockwood's misanthropy, thus, is not just a character detail; it is a structural hinge of the novel, precipitating major plot and character developments. Mr. Lockwood's retreat from "society" locates or sets the scene of the novel in Chapter One;

his division from the ghost of Catherine Linton in Chapter Three launches the narrative. Heathcliff's love for Catherine becomes apparent only after Mr. Lockwood has withdrawn from "love" (his story re: the "real goddess") and Catherine (the specter at the window). Likewise, the story unfolds only after Mr. Lockwood retreats from it and becomes simply a passive vehicle for Nelly, the ubiquitous maid, to tell it. Even the end of the story occurs only after Lockwood has refused to participate in it: he leaves Catherine Heathcliff (Catherine Linton's daughter) behind at Wuthering Heights, despite a half-intention to realize "something more romantic than a fairy tale… and migrate… together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!" (Chapter 31, 322) The engagement of Hareton and Catherine, the novel's fairy-tale finale, like most character and plot connections in the novel, is realized only after Mr. Lockwood has exiled himself from it.

In Carson's "The Glass Essay," however, there is no proper name (such as Mr. Lockwood) which mediates between the pronoun and the name of the author. It is for this reason, and, perhaps, this reason only, that Carson's poem could be indexed as autobiographical. As Michael Foucault writes in his seminal essay, "What is an Author?"

> Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance. (112)

But Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay," as well as Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights do not simply repeat the author function described here by Foucault. Rather than fleshing out a "persona" or an "alter-ego," both works call attention to the act of authorial exile, itself. The first-person narrator in "The Glass Essay," like Mr. Lockwood in Wuthering Heights, makes a conspicuous performance or pronouncement of repeatedly absenting herself from "story" and "love."

As I mentioned before, although "The Glass Essay*"* "narrates" situations in the first-person, the "I" of the poem writes "her own story" only by reflecting off, meandering from, or conflating them with other texts and other stories which construct a biography of Emily Bronte. In his introduction to Carson's book, Guy Davenport reads this intertextual basis of the poem as an attempt to revive narrative poetry. "She [Carson] is among those who are returning poetry to good strong narrative…" writes Davenport (x). "Read 'The Glass Essay,' a poem richer than most novels nowadays," he exhorts, "See how in its utter clarity of narration it weaves and conflates one theme with another, how it works in the Brontes as daimons to preside over the poem and to haunt it, how it tells two strong stories with Tolstoyan skill." (ix) But with a random reference to Tolstoy, Davenport conspicuously misses the specificity of Bronte's "story" in relation to Carson's (in the same sentence in which he indicates that the Brontes "preside over the poem and… haunt it"). What is noteworthy about Bronte's story, according to the poem, is not that it is a "good strong narrative" but that it is a startlingly empty one:

Emily made her awkward way

> Across days and years whose bareness appalls her biographer.[28]
> (GIG 5)

Moreover, by declaring that Carson "is among those who are returning poetry to good strong narrative…" Davenport blatantly disregards the poem's own self-indexing. This is "The Glass Essay," not "The Glass Story."[29] Typographically, "The Glass Essay" appears to be a long free verse poem (38 pages) with short stanzas, usually tercets or quatrains. Some sections of the work sound "poetic" with stylistic effects such as internal rhymes, assonance, alliteration, etc. but overall, the word choice, the movement, and the subject matter fulfill "The Glass Essay's" self-indexing in that they are typical of an essayistic genre in the Montaignian sense, interweaving narrative, poetic, personal, and critical fragments.

The poem not only indexes itself as an essay, but it also takes on the affectations of critical essay writing. The first-person narrates but more often she comments, reflects on, rambles or reels off, interjects, and footnotes other texts. The poem often discusses sources such as the Editor's Preface to Wuthering Heights (20-21) or notes from the original manuscripts – discussions that bespeak a scholarly rather than a "personal" reading of Bronte's work:

> …My favourite pages
> of the Collected Works of Emily Bronte
> are the notes at the back
>
> recording small adjustments made by Charlotte
> to the text of Emily's verse. (GIG 21)

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[28] However, according to the poem, "Blank lines do not say nothing." (GIG 20)

[29] Although this paper refers to "The Glass Essay" as a poem, it is properly speaking a hybrid of both poem and essay.

Also, the poem summarizes other "expert" opinions:

> This sad stunted life, says one.
> Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment
> and despair, says another.
>
> She could have been a great navigator if she'd been male,
> suggests a third… (GIG 5)

It also contests and revises these "expert" opinions. The poem disputes, for example, a specific editorial decision in an edition of Bronte's work, emphasizing its own revision by making it a topic heading:

> WHACHER
>
> Whacher,
> Emily's habitual spelling of this word,
> has caused confusion.
> For example
>
> in the first line of the poem, "Tell me, whether, is it winter?"
> in the Shakespeare Head edition.
> But whacher is what she wrote. (GIG 4)

"The Glass Essay" often seems to parody the precision with which critical works cite their sources, mentioning specific editions or even providing the page number, e.g., "I have Emily p.216 propped up on the sugarbowl…" (GIG 2) This scientism carries over into the first-person's discussion of her own "life story." For example, to describe her father's senility, she writes: "He suffers from a kind of dementia // characterized by two sorts of pathological change / first recorded in 1907 by Alois Alzheimer." (GIG 23) Thus, although one could construe the one-word titles which subdivide "The Glass Essay" – "I," "SHE," "THREE," "WHACHER," "KITCHEN," "LIBERTY," "HERO," "HOT," and "THOU" – as chapters, one is more likely to examine these subdivisions as "topics," given the poem's title and stylistic attributes. This is why it is more productive

to view "The Glass Essay," not as an *example* of narrative form than as a *reading* of narrative form.

Even if one could establish the existence of two "stories" in "The Glass Essay," Davenport fails to isolate any relation or point of identification between them. I would suggest that if the poem does locate any similarity between these two "stories," it is the absence of story and this is why Felman's definition of a feminine "autobiography" has particular resonance here. As an auto/biography, "The Glass Essay*"* doesn't mark out two stories, but sounds out the division between two-non-stories, between an empty biography and an empty autobiography. In mediating two non-stories, Carson's auto/biography attempts to sound out, not "story," but the process of division that engenders story. Writes Carson, "It is a two-way traffic/ /The language of the unsaid." [30] The process of self-exploration is not characterized by "uncovering" or "unfolding" but

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[30] In literal context, the comments here refer to Charlotte's substitution of single letters for expletives in Emily Bronte's work:

> But blank lines do not say nothing.
> As Charlotte puts it,
>
> "The practice of hinting by single letters to those expletives
> with which profane and violent persons are wont to garnish their
> discourse,
> strikes me as a proceeding which,
>
> however well meant, is weak and futile.
> I cannot tell what good it does – what feeling it spares –
> What horror it conceals."
>
> …
> It is a two-way traffic,
> The language of the unsaid… (GIG 20-21)

rather, by a layering of estrangements, a loss of rather than a location of stable identity formations. "The Glass Essay" demands we trace the presence of self through self-exclusion. The trope of glass, in this sense, merits consideration. One can consult any of its manifestations: the glass of a microscope, of a pair of spectacles (a pair of "glasses"); windows, windshields, exhibit cases; and, of course, the glass of self-awareness, the "looking glass." Glass is a medium that enlarges or minimizes (the power of vision), that protects and preserves (the Mona Lisa from the camera flash), that distorts (all mirrors, not just funny house mirrors).[31] In all of its manifestations, glass is a medium which realizes a certain division or distance between seeing subject and something seen, between exterior and interior. Such a trope is essential to understanding the concept of the "I" of "The Glass Essay," who is more properly understood as an agent of difference rather than a proper subject, who, like Mr. Lockwood, is realized through a difference between moments and characters, rather than a being that belongs to any particular moment or any particular persona.

Though "The Glass Essay" begins by immediately indexing itself as autobiography, it does so only by exaggerating the autobiography's keystone of self-referencing – the first-person pronoun. The poem's first section title and its first word, "I" is a redundancy the reader is forced to stutter upon when entering the text:

> I
> I can hear little clicks inside my dream (GIG 1)

---

[31] Glass is, moreover, the window which Lockwood breaks and stops up with books to keep the ghost out; it is where he holds, cuts, and releases the specter's hand.

Instead of demonstrating grammatical point of view, the poem begins by undermining it, tripping it on a two-syllable hesitation, dividing it in a vocalization that aborts as soon as it begins. Before it is a speaking subject, it is a spoken separation, and by stumbling on its subject signifier, the opening words of the poem qualify and destabilize autobiographical self-referencing.

The body of section "I" underlines this division in its use of articles and possessive pronouns:

> I
>
> I can hear little clicks inside my dream.
> Night drips its silver tap
> down the back.
> At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking
>
> of the man who
> left in September.
> His name was Law.
>
> My face in the bathroom mirror
> has white streaks down it.
> I rinse the face and return to bed.
> Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother. (GIG 1)

In the third stanza, the narrator's face divides in two: a possessive pronoun precedes "face in the bathroom mirror," but a definitive article precedes "the face" that "I rinse." "I" owns the glass face ("My face in the bathroom mirror") but not the face that feels the touch of hands and water.

This impersonal glass face translates the significance of the back in her dream: "Night drips its silver tap / down the back." In her dream, "I" transposes the tears trickling down her face into a silver tap dripping down the back. In a very literal interpretation, one could say this transposition signifies the emotional detachment of "I:"

she is crying but doesn't know she is crying. "Tap" has a double meaning here. It is a faucet (Webster's) not screwed tight enough, dripping water droplets down "the back." But it is also "a light rap" (Webster's), the sound the droplets make, hitting and resonating off of a surface; hence, the rhythmic "clicks inside my dream." In either case, "tap" carries the sense that "I" can't cry, can't conjoin with or precede that active verb of emotion; something else, something mechanical and metal leaks in the stead of "I" crying. The "I" of the poem, the stuttered and divided utterance of the first line can only "Hear little clicks inside my dream." The tapping of water from the tap is an annoying, unwanted sound, a sound which should be, but for some reason, is not shut off. Thus, the poem transcribes not what "I" feels but what "I" hears and doesn't want to hear. Like Lockwood, "I" hears and doesn't want to hear a message tapped out on a glass surface (a window, an unfeeling "I"): "Let me in! – let me in!" (Wuthering Heights, Chapter 3, 43).

Thus, in the dream, it is not the face which registers crying, but "the back." Physically speaking, "the face" is that which feels the effects of crying; but more significantly, idiomatically speaking, "the face" is that which displays and receives emotional exchange. One says, "I couldn't show him my face," to mean "I couldn't reveal to him my true feelings." One says, "I faced my fears" or "I faced my life," to indicate a process of self-actualization. Here, the face is replaced by "the back," that which has the reverse connotations of "face:" "I turned my back on him/it," or I shut it/him off, cut off any personal connection with him/it. The back is not at all a mask for the face; it is the negative of face. "I's" face is both a back and a mirror images which does not feel the water from the tap ("I rinse the face and return to bed") nor the tap of tears ("little clicks inside my dream.")

"The Glass Essay," then, characterizes an "I" who immediately divides from "I," not only in the first stuttered utterance of the poem, but in the erasure of a personal and self-possessed "face." The first section, moreover, characterizes an "I" obsessed with the divisions of time. The "little clicks inside my dream" allude to the ticking of a clock, especially since the poem notes the precise hour when she awakes ("At 4 A.M. I wake"). This obsession with the divisions of time, however, does not only characterize the first section. Numbers also appear as arbitrary markers throughout "The Glass Essay:"

> [She] died on the sofa at home at 2 P.M. on a winter afternoon
> In her thirty-first year… (GIG 6)
>
> It was a small (4 X 6) notebook
> with a dark red cover marked 6d.
> and contained 44 poems in Emily's minute hand. (GIG 20)
>
> through a door with a big window
> and a combination lock (5-25-3) (GIG 25)

This obsession with the numeric carries over to the section titles. The reader cannot be completely certain that the section heading is a subject pronoun; it could, after all, be a roman numeral one. With the second section title, "SHE," the reader might decide that the first section title was indeed a subject pronoun and nothing else, but the third section's title "THREE" affirms a numeric subtext to the first two sections. Pronouns are thereby linked to the impersonal mode of counting.

The "I," in "The Glass Essay," like Mr. Lockwood in Wuthering Heights, simply makes a dramatic gesture of dividing from "her story." We might consult Kristeva, again, for an explanation of this dynamic at work:

> Instead of sounding himself to his 'being,' he [the exile] does so concerning his place: 'Where am I' instead of 'Who am I?' For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never "one, nor homogenous,

> nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines… constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. (Powers of Horror 8)

A figure who traces the "where" rather than the "who," "I" resides outside the narrative in order to serve as a transparent vehicle for its telling. Continually distancing herself from her own story of lost love, she serves as the vehicle for the story of someone else. Thus, although the word that begins "The Glass Essay" is "I," after three stanzas the reader encounters the topic heading, "SHE," and after another four stanzas, "THREE." With its numeric subtext, the initial "I" swiftly divides into a ternary structure of identity.[32] "I" becomes by her own fated movements, what the poem calls a "whacher," a "third party" to herself.[33]

> Whacher,
> Emily's habitual spelling of this word,
> has caused confusion.
> For example
>
> In the first line of the poem printed "Tell me, whether, is it winter?"
> in the Shakespeare Head edition.
> But whacher is what she wrote.
>
> Whacher is what she was.
> She whached God and humans and moor wind and open night.
> She whached eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather.

---

[32] Indeed, one could argue that this numerical structure patterns the poem, since *The Glass Essay* is written, for the most part, in tercets.

[33] Writes Kristeva, "…the stray [exile] considers himself as equivalent to a Third Party. He secures the latter's judgment, he acts on the strength of its power in order to condemn, he grounds himself on its law to tear the veil of oblivion but also to set up its object as inoperative. As jettisoned. Parachuted by the Other" (Powers of Horror 9).

> She whached the bars of time, which broke.
> She whached the poor core of the world,
> wide open.
>
> To be a whacher is not a choice.
> There is nowhere to get away from it,
> no ledge to climb up to… (GIG 4-5)

The whacher stands outside, recoiling from the desire which propels the narrative. She is destined to serve as the vehicle for the story of desire because of her own scission from it, because of her own loss of desire.

The poem thereby indicates that it is no coincidence Wuthering Heights is the story of love across great divides (among them, life and death) at the same time that it is the story of a repeated dividing from love. The protagonist and the witness share the narrative;[34] Mr. Lockwood inscribes the division between Heathcliff and Catherine which drives the story. Carson characterizes this division:

> She [Emily] put into him [Heathcliff] in place of a soul
>
> the constant cold departure of Catherine from his nervous system
> every time he drew a breath or moved thought.
> She broke all his moments in half, (GIG 14)

"The Glass Essay" also bears the story of lost love, but cannot bear it without bearing another story, the story of Emily Bronte, "a life whose bareness appalls her biographers."(GIG 5) Thus, the project of the poem seems at once biographical and autobiographical. "I" conflates the details of her own story with biographical and critical

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[34] As Mr. Lockwood declares in the opening paragraph to the novel: "Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to **divde** the desolation between us." (21)

readings of Bronte's work in order to reveal an estrangement from story there. All the movements of "I's" story echo the objective narrator's repeated self-exclusion.

"The Glass Essay" locates this process of self-exclusion as a shared characteristic of feminine authorship, figuring this "shared territory" as a moor. The moor is used to define a literal scene or setting for the poem in the section's first stanza but it is also the dramatic locale for Wuthering Heights, so the term can't be taken quite literally or autobiographically:

> SHE
>
> She lives on a moor in the north.
> She lives alone.
> Spring opens like a blade there.
> I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books—
>
> some for my mother, some for me
> including "The Collected Works of Emily Bronte"
> This is my favorite author.
>
> Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
> Whenever I visit my mother
> I feel I am turning into Emily Bronte. (GIG 1)

The "she," lacking a proper antecedent, could refer both to "I's" mother and Emily Bronte. Both live "on a moor in the north," both live, quintessentially, alone. It is becoming this "she," the literal and figurative "female author's mother" that haunts "I's" auto/biography in "The Glass Essay. " One reads, "my main fear… Whenever I visit my mother / I feel I am turning into Emily Bronte" but what we also read, by association, is "Whenever I visit my mother / I feel that I am turning into" *her,* since these lines play on the oft-stated fear that "I am afraid I'm turning into my mother."

By playing a kind of pronoun game, the poem anticipates "the moor" as a space occupied by three feminine figures:

THREE

Three silent women at the kitchen table.
My mother's kitchen is dark and small but out the window

There is the moor, paralyzed with ice.
It extends as far as the eye can see
Over flat miles to a solid unlit white sky. (GIG 2)

In the third section of the poem, THREE, the third woman at the table is Emily: "I have Emily p. 216 propped open on the sugarbowl/ but am covertly watching my mother." (GIG 2) "The Glass Essay" implies that this position is one where "she" is either imprisoned in a story which isn't hers, a space which figures into the poem as the "kitchen," the confines of the domesticated woman, or she is exiled from story, upon a desolate landscape of silence. Both Mr. Lockwood of Wuthering Heights and the "I" of "The Glass Essay" occupy the latter space, the horizon of voicelessness. They are feminine authors, which is to say, they bear rather than participate in the story of love. "The Glass Essay" does not narrate a story of love and loss but repeats Mr. Lockwood's story in Wuthering Heights – the story of repeated distancing and division from desire, the story of having no story.

Felman's concept of feminine autobiography as one that cannot be written but must be read is also particularly applicable to Carson's Autobiography of Red, a title which Jes Bettis has pointed out is "easily transliterated as Autobiography of Read" (1) As in "The Glass Essay," The Autobiography of Red is full of the kind of intimate and mundane details that feel personal or derived from personal experience, but the "autobiography" is never attached to a first-person pronoun that could potentially substitute for the author. Technically speaking, it is only attached to the word "Red" and to the character, Geryon, who is not a character *written* by Carson but, rather, a character

revised or *read* by Carson from the fragments of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis.* Stesichorus' *Geryoneis,* in turn, is itself a *reading/ revision* of a Homerian epic.[35] In Homer's version, Geryon did not play a feature role. He was a minor character, and a disposable one, in an epic tale which featured the hyper-masculine Hercules. Killing Geryon, the "red-winged monster," was simply one of Hercules ten labors. Stesichorus *Geryoneis,* however, re-read Homer's epic conventions by transforming the minor character into a protagonist of his own narrative. Carson explains the significance of Stesichorus's reading in the introduction to her book and how it overturns typical notions of heroism and monstrosity:

> If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful from Geryon's own experience. (AR 6)

What remains of Stesichorus' work are fragments so Anne Carson's "reading" of his tale is two-fold. She translates the fragments into English (to term Carson's translation as a "reading" is not inaccurate since she takes interpretive liberties with anachronistic images e.g., "red ticking taxi") and provides this translation as a preface to her own (considerably) fleshed-out version of the tale now titled "Autobiography of Red: A Romance." As a result, the word "autobiography" maintains a complex and potentially

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[35] Rae also summarizes the problems of identifying authorship in Autobiography of Red: "The text, after all, is written by Carson (author) about Geryon (author of his own biography), who in turn is a mutation of the character that Stesichorus (author), drew from existing Greek mythologies (by other authors)" (2-3).

manifold meaning within both the title and body of Carson's work. In his essay on Carson's Autobiography of Red, Stuart Murray explains how the meaning of that word never stabilizes:

> …the novel is ostensibly less the autobiography of its author than the autobiography of its main character, Geryon, and about the world in which he dwells ; it is the autobiography "of red," no less than the autobiography of the reader who writes his or her own life into its pages; and more generally still, it is the autobiography of autobiographical writing itself. Autobiography and its proper author-subject – if indeed it has one – float almost indiscernibly through the text…. (102)

Murray points out that Autobiography of Red is "the autobiography of autobiographical writing itself" but I would argue with his use of the word "writing." Indeed, "Autobiography of Red" does tell the story of Geryon's attempt to construct an autobiography but Geryon does not *write* this and I believe that is an important detail of Carson's story. As a child, Geryon's autobiographical efforts are sculptural. In the section titled, "Tuesday," the overheard fragments of a telephone conversation by Geryon's mother describe this:

> *Geryon? fine he's right here working on his autobiography*
> ….
> *No it's a sculpture he doesn't know how to write yet*
> ….
> *Oh this and that stuff he finds outside Geryon's always finding things aren't you Geryon?* (AR 35)

Of course, it could be argued that this type of autobiographical construction changes when two sections later, in "Ideas," we learn that "Geryon learned to write." (AR 37) Geryon even writes the title "Autobiography" on the notebook in which he writes. But

instead of writing his autobiography in the notebook, Geryon indicates that "Inside he set down the facts." (AR 37(The paragraph which ensues is titled "Total Facts Known About Geryon" (AR 37) but these facts are not derived from the experiences described thus far by Carson's "Geryon." They are the "facts" of Homer's epic poem: "*Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one day killed Geryon got the cattle."*(AR 37) Moreover, the first sentence of the paragraph "*Geryon was a monster everything about him was red"* is a word-for-word copy of the first line from Carson's translation of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* on page nine. When Geryon's mother asks his teacher in a parent-teacher conference, "Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?" Geryon tacks on a new ending:

> *New Ending:*
> *All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand in hand.* (AR 38)

However, although not a word-for-word copy, this ending is a euphemistic re-tooling of Carson's translation of Stesichorus' fragment, "Geryon's End," on page 14

> The red world And corresponding red breezes
>
> Went on Geryon did not. (AR 14)

Two sections later, in "Click" when Geryon begins his adult autobiography it is not, as the section title reveals, a written autobiography. It is a photographic one. Moreover, as an autobiography in this particular section, Geryon's photographs illustrate his estrangement from language and the poem's own declaration that Geryon "had recently relinquished speech." (AR 40) Geryon's mother talks to him from across the kitchen table, asking questions about the "new kid" (Herakles) he met at the bus station but, rather than providing a verbal response, Geryon "holds the camera in front of his face

adjusting the focus;" (AR 40) when his mother proceeds with her line of questioning, Geryon still not answering, "was focusing the camera on her throat;" (AR 40) and when his mother takes a last drag on her cigarette, comments "you probably know / more about sex than I do," and laughs, Geryon, still behind the camera,"began to focus again, on her mouth." (AR 40)

Although Carson's lyric subject occupies a position of "whaching," exile, separation, and division, I believe that this subject is much different from the kind of divided self found in Plath's poetry, a self which stands outside the self in order to examine it or monitor it. Carson's subject stands outside itself in order to rewrite, revise, or reread the conditions under which the subject has been scripted. Carson's subject divides and continues to divide in order to illuminate that it is a "two-way traffic/ the language of the unsaid," to sound out an absence in which "blank lines do not say nothing" and in which a photograph of a mother's throat and a mouth might say more about a self than the vocal apparatus could.

3.3 Arbitrary Markings

Making a distinction between Carson's use of the imagination and Plath's use of vivid imagery in the visual aspects of their poetry is essential to understanding how both poets define a feminine subject. In Plath's world, the subject is bound to the script which wants to define her. Pre-existing concepts of femininity – dictated by a cultural history of specularity that turns women into visual objects -- limit her ability to express herself as a self or as a speaking subject. She is a mute subject who can only make ironic gestures that reveal the script that is gagging her. In Carson's world, I would argue, femininity

reproaches subjectivity by redefining the visual script that defines women as objects. She does this by returning us to the foundation of visualization -- the imagination. As was shown in section one, Carson consistently jars ready-made images by loosening or confounding the link between perception and language. One facet of this "loosening" in her poetry is an attention to how people, time, and things are marked or spatialized. Carson's work contemplates the arbitrariness with which entities are "marked:" how time is marked, how history is marked, how boundaries are set, how rules of possession (what belongs to whom) are established.

For Carson, marking is a decidedly male activity. This is a topic most directly addressed in her work Men in the Off Hours which contains two essays devoted to the difference between the realm of the "masculine" and that of the "feminine." In the essay which opens the book, "Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War," Carson examines the difference between both writers' concept of time and history through their wartime narratives. The difference between their concepts is akin to the perspective one assumes in relation to the world or the events at hand. Thucydides account of the Peloponnesian War in his *History* assumes the kind of omniscient authority that one would find as a viewer examining a painting with conventionally rendered perspective, that which gives the spectator a "godlike placement" by making "the single eye the center of the visible world." (Berger 16)

> Thucydides sets us on a high vantage point above such facts, so that we look down as if at a map of the Greek states and see lives churning forward there – each in its own time zone, its own system of measures, its

> own local names. Soon this manifold will fuse into one time and system, under the name of war. But first we see it as hard separate facts (MOH 3-4).

Virginia Woolf's short story, "The Mark on the Wall," on the other hand, a work which Woolf wrote at the start of World War I and which Carson reads as Woolf's own marking of the beginning of war, positions the author amid rather than separate from the events at hand. Woolf "does not, like Thucydides, rise above ordinary time to a high point and look down on other people, other people's reckonings. She stays in her own time. She stays right in the middle." (MOH 4) Woolf's text does not assume authorial omniscience nor does it offer "hard, separate facts." Woolf's narrative is, rather, propelled by the uneven flow of speculation and tangential reflections, e.g. What is the mark on the wall? Is it a hole, a stain, a shadow? With each speculation, Woolf proceeds on a different train of thought: the memories of a very diligent housekeeper, an account of "a few things lost in one lifetime" or a philosophical inquiry sparked by the question "What is knowledge?"

Carson indicates that the mindset of Woolf's narrator mirrors that of one just starting to adjust to the context and realities of war: "At the beginning of war, when rules and time and freedom are just starting to slip off the lines, you can sit and think quietly about a mark on the wall." As an observer, Woolf's narrator is more akin to the kind of seeing proposed by Merleau-Ponty in his essay "The Intertwining the Chiasm." In this essay, Merleau-Ponty insists that there is no seer who can be defined separately from what is seen nor can "the seen" stand independent of its seer.

> What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first

> empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing 'all naked' because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh." (131)

Woolf's narration weaves seer and seen together through the play of speculation. The mark changes along with the whimsy and moods of the author; the narrator, in fact, does not want to get up and look at the mark on the wall since this will cease the game at hand. Woolf's narrator's meandering thoughts are cut short, however, by the entrance of another person who announces, "I'm going to buy a newspaper" as well as providing some additional commentary," Though it's no good, buying newspapers…Nothing ever happens. Curse this war! God damn this war!...All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall." (Woolf 116) For Carson, even though Woolf leaves the newspaper-buyer's gender undesignated, "you grasp at once without any mention of the fact that someone is a man."

> He could no more be a woman than Thucydides. Not only because of his need for newspapers and view of the war ("Though it's no good buying newspapers….Nothing ever happens. Curse this war…!") but because he at once identifies the mark on the wall as what it is. A snail is a snail. Even in the off hours, men know marks (MOH 7).

Carson, here, not only identifies "marking" as a masculine activity, she also suggests that it is an activity which amputates the creative and thoughtful musings of Woolf's speaker. The interloper's intent to buy a newspaper (a document which operates under the

historiographical time criticized by Carson) as well as his instant identification of the mark on the wall as a snail removes any further "need" for speculation or wondering.

Carson's identification of marking as a masculine activity as well as her validation of Woolf's meandering narrative as a historical account recalls Cixous' argument in "Castration or Decapitation" that the feminine imagination has been constrained and repressed by the Symbolic regimentation and regulation of patriarchal discourse. In order to reclaim the repressed "voice of the mother," Cixous writes that we need to embrace the disorderliness, the endlessness, and the wandering of feminine writing (Cixous and Kuhn). Carson's endorsement of Woolf's story – which is disorderly and wandering with no apparent end – as well as aspects of her own work seem to answer this imperative issued by Cixous. Carson's work tries to resurrect wonderment and speculation by undoing a concept of language as a system that "marks" or irretrievably defines genders, identities, time, space, economy, etc. As the essay comparing Thucydides to Woolf demonstrates, "history" is one of those forms of arbitrary markings and "historiographical" time is not more valid than personal time – it is simply conceived through inflexible visual constructs of what constitutes historical perspective (the single omniscient eye) and historical time (hard separate facts).

Carson's continues this contemplation of history as an enforced set of visual and spatial constructs in her work, Nox. A poetic work which aspires to make a life and death *matter* in a context where history (as we know it) would deem otherwise, Nox defies any potential challenge to the authoritative weight of poetic texts simply in its physical form. Nox is a tome of a book – thick and heavy, large capital letters on its spine, and sturdy grey cardboard which is more than a binding. It's a box -- a box which

encases the flimsier back and front covers of the book itself and provides a secure repository for the accordion-style pagination which is capable of falling or twisting into a longer, less "contained" document (I know this because it happened to me several times while reading it). Carson provides a description of Nox on the back side of the box: "When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get." "Epitaph" is an apt label for Nox, given that an epitaph is a sometimes descriptive, sometimes "subjective," sometimes literary, and usually biographical construct. Moreover, the epitaph yields an authority not often afforded to the literary or subjective: it is written in stone. According to O'Rourke in her review of Nox, Carson's book is "itself that headstone…it has the squat aspect of a stone tablet." (1) The title of the book, "Nox" means, "night" in Latin, though as O'Rourke points out " Nox is also the Roman goddess of night—perhaps the oldest of the Roman deities, the mother, by many accounts, of sleep, fate, and death." (1)

Although an artistic, literary, and personal account, Carson's Nox negotiates for itself, an authoritative status equal to that of history. Just as Carson validates Woolf's short story as being as much an account of war as Thucydides' History in her introductory essay to Men in the Off Hours, Carson validates her own biographical construct in Nox as one that is as weighty as a strictly "historical one." Nox introduces itself by explaining why an unrevised notion of history had served as an inadequate framework for narrating the life and loss of her brother:

> I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history. (Section 1.0)

Carson could index her work as an "elegy" without contemplating the notion of history, but she is not content with the "weight" the word "elegy" gives to this memorial of her brother. An uncomplicated definition of "elegy" indicates a profusion of sentiment, an expression of sorrow, but Carson's work while full of sentiment is decidedly not "sentimental" in the sense of being marked by an effusion or performance of emotion. It is marked less by expressiveness than by inquisitiveness. It asks questions, it sorts through memories, letters, photographs, and recalled conversations. Carson does not let her recollections fall prey to the category of hazy remembrance, for she provides documentation of her "research." She posts fragments of letters handwritten on yellowed pages as back-up for her stories and quotes, makes a collage of the stamps used on the envelopes sent by her brother to evidence his foreign travels, and affixes to various pages unaltered and unenhanced black-and-white photographs -- which retain the jagged white frame used by commercial photo developers at that time -- to support her visual memories of the past. Moreover, it ensconces these fragments within the scholarly objective of translating a poem by Catullus from Latin to English. The poem is displayed on the book's first "page" and, roughly speaking, every other "page" thereafter (one must keep in mind that the pages all connect accordion style), provides an English definition for each Latin word of the poem. What Carson shows through this "translation" is the impossibility of defining one, for these are full, unabridged definitions which provide the different possible nuances, meanings, and subtleties which can accompany a word. These are also not simply copies of the pages of a reference book; Carson adds her own flourishes by inscribing the elegiac elements of her inquiry into the definitions. For her translation of "donarem" for example, she provides what one would normally expect to

find in a dictionary "[DONUM + O] to present, endow, reward (with); to provide; to honour; to present, grant, give (to)…" but these simple one-word replacements unravel into more complicated ones, ones that sometimes require examples, which resonate with the timbre of her entire project. The definition of "donarem" ends with

> to give up (for the sake of), sacrifice (to); to make a present (to another) of (a claim or the like against him)…to forgive, let off (a person for the sake of); *non donatus* without a gift; *ego te quid donem?* what would I give you? Nox *nihil donat* nothing is night's gift. (Section 4.2)

The final entries for "donarem" touch upon the crisis that fuels Nox's very objective – how to remember a person, how to carry the memory of that person, how to give form to that memory so that one can carry it. The author wants her elegy to have the weight of truth, the heft of authenticity which belongs to history. However, history's conventional markings don't adequately outline the presence of her brother nor do they illuminate his absence; simply put, within history's conventional markings, the life and loss of her brother don't "matter:" "No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history." (Section 1.0) However, immediately after making this statement, Carson proceed to undo it by arguing for an expansion of what constitutes history so that it includes poetic flourishes as well as personal experience.

> History and elegy are akin. The word "history" comes from an ancient Greek verb...meaning "to ask." One who asks about things -- about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell -- is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (Section 1.1)

Just as Carson used Woolf as an alternative to Thucydides, here Carson provides an alternative to Hekataios (thought of as the first historian) with Herodotus, a writer who she believes composed a more thorough and thoughtful model for the writing of history:

> There was a man named Hekataios, who lived in the city of Miletos in the generation before Herodotos and who cannot be called an "historian" because Herodotos is regarded as the author of that role, but who composed (about 500 BC) a How To Go Around the Earth (with map) containing this (as I think of it) metaphor for his own activity:
>
> > He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it to see if he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weights the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun. (Hekataios fr. 324 *Fragmente der griechiscehen Historiker* ed. Jacoby [Berlin 1923] cf. Herodotos 1.73)
>
> Hekataios is describing the sacred phoenix which lived in Arabia but came to Heliopolis in Egypt once every five hundred years to bury a father there. The phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing, hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the light. He seems to take a clear view of necessity. And in the shadows that flash over him as he makes his way from Arabia to Egypt maybe he comes to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying – composed as it is of these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them, his motion, his asking. (Section 1.1)

Of course, Carson is not simply describing Hekataios' activity of writing history; she is describing her own activity -- the need to pursue the questions of the life and loss of her brother, to weigh them, measure them, handle them, as well as the need to give them the proper form, to encapsulate them in such a way so that she doesn't remain mired within grief and can move forward, but also to give them a form that allows her to carry them with her – a form that allows her to move forward without forgetting. For Herodotos, the "historian," this form is not one that can be created through metaphor or personal experience; it must be scientifically diagnosed and measured.

> Autopsy is a term historians use of the 'eyewitnessing' of data or events by the historian himself, a mode of authorial power. To withhold this authorization is also powerful. Herodotos carefully does not allege to have seen a phoenix, which comes only once every five hundred years, although he mentions the same legends as Hekataios. Herodotos likes to introduce such information with a world like...'it is said,' as one might use

> *on dit* or *dicteur*. "To be nothing - is that not, after all, the most satisfactory fact in the whole world?" asks a dog in a novel I read once (Virginia Woolf *Flush* 87). I wonder what the smell of nothing is. Smell of autopsy. (Section 1.2)

Carson suggests that the only way to process loss Herodotian-style is to make out of death, a dead body. A dead body has form and is a thing that can be seen and accounted for, but it is not portable – it must be left behind -- and its visual traces are buried, placed out of sight. It doesn't provide the kind of light that would still persist after the death of a star, i.e., it would not show Carson's brother to be "the starry lad that he was": To consider her brother, Herodotian style, is to leave her *non donatus* without a gift. Carson asks what form can I give you: *ego te quid donem?* what would I give you? for she is not content with the oblivion of darkness: *Nox nihil donat* nothing is night's gift.

Carson calls our attention to the fact that history is written or authored, that it employs methods which train the reader to believe that they are the only valid ones and. As a result, this "history" fails to incorporate the myths, legends, or metaphors that form the fabric of culture; instead, it sits in judgment on them. When Carson, then, does something like translate an ancient Greek text so that it contains anachronistic phrases such as a "ticking red taxi" and "The centaur/Patted the sofa beside him," (AR 10,11) she could be accused of "disrespect" for historical accuracy or scholarly methods. She even does things like add an extra part to section five of Longinus's *de Sublimate* so she can quote this imaginary source for her epigraph to "TV Men," "TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from the Latin *videre* "to see." (MOH 61). Mark Scroggins deems this "pseudo-epigraph" a "rather labored joke" (Scroggins 3) but I think this is a fairly abrupt judgment of a feature of Carson's poetics which attempts to revise and expand our concepts of what constitutes history and what constitutes scholarship. For Carson, the

detachment of these "disciplines" from poetic interpretation and creative discourse creates marks and boundaries that deaden the potential vibrancy of the past. Her addition to de Longinus' *de Sublimate's* Section 5 is simply an interpretation, a small anachronistic stroke that gives contemporary resonance to de Longinus' work. Moreover, given the epigraph's relevance to the series – it points out what thoughts, reflections, nuances, etc. disappear or be diluted within a filmic representation -- I do not think the epigraph is a labored joke. Certainly, there is a layer of humor but is more like a gentle wit or a wry smile, something which doesn't belie the meaning or intent of what the epigraph says.

Historical time is not the only type of arbitrary "male" marking that Carson contemplates in her work. She also investigates markers of difference and of personal boundaries. In her essay "Dirt and Desire," Carson examines how ancient Greek culture defined boundaries to contain feminine "formlessness." She looks first at Greek philosophy, noting that "the image of woman as a formless content is one made explicit in the philosophers" (132). She provides an example from Aristotle,

> Physiologically and psychologically women are wet…Aristotle…tells us the wet is that which is not bounded by any boundary of its own but can be readily be bounded, while the dry is that which is already bounded by a boundary of its own but can with difficulty be bounded (citation). On this reasoning it becomes possible to differentiate woman from man not only as wet from dry but as the unbounded from the bounded, as content from form, as polluted from pure. (MOH 132)

Carson continues to explain why such "unboundedness" or "wetness" would threaten the fabric of Greek civilization. As a civilization based on possession and economic exchange, identities of people and objects had to be separated and valuated before they comingled:

> The [ancient Greek] society developed a complex cultural apparatus, including rituals like supplication, hospitality and gift exchange, which historians and anthropologists are only recently coming to understand as mechanisms for defining and securing the boundaries of everything in the habitable world. Civilization is a function of boundaries. (MOH 130)

Things or people which defied or complicated boundary-making, therefore, elicited a kind of cultural compulsion, to contain or separate them from civilization itself. Women fell into this category:

> In such a society, individuals who are regarded as specially lacking in control of their own boundaries, or as possessing special talents and opportunities for confounding the boundaries of others, evoke fear and controlling action from the rest of society. Women are so regarded in ancient Greek society… To isolate and insulate the female, from society and from itself, was demonstrably the strategy informing many of the notions, conventions and rituals that surrounded female life in the ancient world." (MOH 130-131)

Carson indicates that the assumptions underlying Greek thinking are revealed not just in Greek rituals and Greek philosophy but in Greek mythology, as well. "In myth, woman's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable." As a result, Carson observes that "The women

of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity." (133) She cites Medusa, the Sphynx, Skylla, the Sirens, Daphne, and Pasiphaë as examples. She also creates her *own* example in Autobiography of Red with the monster-character, Geryon.

Although Geryon, a red monster with wings, is engendered by pronouns as "male", I will argue in the next section why I believe his gender status addresses issues with feminine subjectivity. For now, we can simply observe that Geryon, as a monster confounds the boundaries of human civilization. Like Carson's women of Greek society, Geryon faces the consequences of the threat his "formlessness" poses, for his story is a succession of confrontations with these boundaries which using Carson's words "isolate and insulate [him] from society and from [him]self." The frequent allusions and references to captivity in Autobiography of Red lead us to believe that his subjectivity is repressed and contained:

> What about you, Geryon,
> what's your favorite weapon? Cage, said Geryon from behind his knees. (AR 33)

> They went out painting.
> Geryon did an early red-winged LOVESLAVE on the garage of the priest's house
> …
> *…There's some paint left—another LOVESLAVE*? *-no*
> *let's do something cheerful.*
> *all your designs are about captivity, it depresses me.* (AR 55)

> What is time made of?
> He could feel it massed around him, he could see its big deadweight blocks
> padded tight together
> all the way from Bermuda to Buenos Aires – too tight. His lungs
>
> contracted. (AR 80)

Although Geryon has wings – a feature which would typically serve as a vehicle for freedom – the wings do not serve a functional purpose until the end of the poem. Throughout the narrative, the wings only serve as a marker of difference, a deformation which Geryon consistently binds, tightens, and hides beneath a large overcoat:

> His wings were struggling. They tore against each other on his shoulders
> like the little mindless red animals they were.
> With a piece of wooden plank he'd found in the basement Geryon made a
> back brace
> and lashed the wings tight.
> Then put his jacket back on. (AR 53)

> …He shifted his upper
> back muscles inside
> the huge overcoat, tightening his wings…(AR 82)

> Geryon closed his eyes a moment, pulling
> his overcoat tight around him. (AR 124)

Geryon's wings are, like Carson's "formless" femininity, something that rather than freeing him, encumber him, and must be hidden, restrained, and ignored.

The way Geryon deals with his wings parallels other moments in Geryon's childhood, where he must confront and adapt to the presence of boundaries. Autobiography of Red follows Geryon's developing sense of the world and his place within in it in chronological fashion, starting with Geryon's first days of kindergarten. The title of the first section is "Justice" and the first line reads "Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early." What Geryon learns of "justice" is the boundaries it creates for him. In the first month of school, Geryon's brother leads Geryon to school and to his classroom. When the brother tires of this task and decides to leave Geryon to his own devices, Geryon encounters his first "boundary," justice.

> …as September moved into October an unrest was growing in Geryon's brother.
> Geryon had always been stupid
> but nowadays the look in his eyes made a person feel strange
> Just take me once more I'll get it this time,
> Geryon would say. The eyes terrible holes. Stupid, said Geryon's brother and left him
> Geryon had no doubt stupid was correct. But when justice is done
> the world drops away. (AR 24)

What Geryon learns of "justice" is that it involves judgment, and that while this judgment may be "true" or "correct" in its determination, its creates a boundary line that allows certain people and certain perspectives to be lost outside of it ("when justice is done/ the world drops away"), just as Geryon is lost when his brother leaves him standing at the steps of the "Main Door" to the school: "In place of a map of the school corridor lay a deep growing blank." Geryon continues to go to school, alone, without his brother's guidance, but never through the Main Door because, as he states, "Justice is pure:"

> After that Geryon went to school alone.
> He did not approach Main Door at all. Justice is pure.
> He would make his way around the long brick sidewall,
> past the windows of Seventh Grade Fourth Grade, Second Grade and Boys'
> to the north end of the school
> and position himself in the bushes outside Kindergarten. There he would stand
> until someone inside noticed and came out to show him the way.
> (AR 24-25)

The "justice" that Geryon's older brother exercises is not simply the decision to let Geryon find his own way to school; his declaration that Geryon is "stupid," a characteristic which in the context of learning and school, is a judgment which exiles Geryon to the margins, the sidewalls, and the bushes, away from the "Main Door." Geryon's sense of place is marked just as his identity is, and the sense of "justice" as

"fairness" gives way to that of "justice" as a judgment made arbitrarily by an authority figure or as Carson might say, another kind of male "marking."

Geryon learns more about boundaries and how they "contain" his subjectivity in "Each," the section following "Justice." Here, again, Geryon's confrontation with "marking" resonates the kind of feminine struggle described by Carson in "Dirt and Desire as well as by French feminist theorist Helene Cixous in her essay, "Castration and Decapitation" (an essay which clearly informs Carson's own work). In this section, Geryon learns the rules of possession and exchange, of what Hélène Cixous might deem a "masculine economy," where one "gives" in order to "get. (Man is strategy, is reckoning how to" win" with the least possible loss, at the lowest possible cost. (47)) This economy relies, first of all, on the concepts of individual ownership. Geryon learns first learns this when, at the beginning, of the section, he asks his mother "*What does* each *mean*? His mother responds "*Each means like you and your brother each have your own room*." Ironically, however, this ceases to be true when, a few lines subsequent to this, Geryon is forced to move into his brother's room during his grandmother's multi-month visit. That this is Geryon's brother's room or domain is clear, and Geryon proceeds to learn the boundaries of his body, his self, and his sexuality within its rules. Geryon's brother persuades him to perform sexual favors in exchange for material compensation, specifically, "cat's-eyes," a type of marble which resembles its nomenclature and a type which Geryon could not obtain on his own

> …Geryon very much wanted a cat's-eye. He never could win a cat's eye when he
> knelt on cold knees
> On the basement floor to shoot marbles with his brother and his brother's friends.
> A cat's-eye

> is outranked only by a steelie. And so they developed an economy of sex for cat's-eyes. (AR 28)

Geryon's introduction to his own sexuality happens within the terms of Cixous male economy, within this "economy of sex for cat's eyes" where one good is exchanged for another. As a result, Geryon's sexuality becomes a thing, a unit of exchange as dehumanized as the marble's "eye." The relationship between his brother and himself becomes a constant bartering where Geryon's body is the commodity:

> Voyaging in the rotten ruby of the night became a contest of freedom and bad logic.
> *Come on Geryon*
> *No.*
> *You owe me.*
> *No.*
> *I hate you. I don't care. I'll tell Mom. Tell Mom what?*
> *How nobody likes you at school.*
> Geryon paused. Facts are bigger in the dark (AR 28)

"Economy" just as "justice" begins to define a territory for Geryon, an interior one: one night, after he performs sexual favors for his brother, Geryon has a revelation: " he thought about the difference/ between outside and inside/ Inside is mine, he thought…" The next day's trip to the beach cements Geryon's sense of place within this world of valuation:

> Geryon's brother found an American dollar bill
> and gave it to Geryon. Geryon found a piece of an old war helmet and hid it.
> That was also the day
> he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things
> particularly his own heroism
> and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted all outside things. (AR 29)

Since Geryon's body belongs to his brother's room – to its logic and terms – Geryon estranges himself from himself. His body, incapable of expressing itself within the terms of his brother's economy can only preserve a sense of self by making the act of concealment -- the act of preventing thoughts and feelings from finding expression in outward gestures -- the very definition of his "own" interior space. Thus, while Geryon is coded male by the pronouns used in Autobiography of Red, it is clear that his encounters with boundaries and the limits they place on his ability to express himself echo the kinds of struggles that Carson depicts as feminine ones elsewhere in her work.

3.4 Gender and Genre

In the previous chapter, I reflected on how Sylvia Plath's poetry, particularly her earlier work, observes the formalism of New Critical poetry: using regular meter and rhyme patterns, as well as deploying the sharp, object-oriented imagery endorsed by modernist Ezra Pound. Plath's later work comments on the constraints of this formalism through hyperbolization, exaggerating alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and highlighting the violence involved in fashioning object-images. Combined with her images of muted voices, shut mouths, and snared tongues, these gestures in Plath's later work illustrate how the "script of poetry" prevents Plath's lyric subject from speaking poetically, or from even speaking at all. Carson's work on the other hand, frees itself from strict conceptions of poetry by exploiting other generic conventions and mixing them in her work. As Meghan O'Rourke observes in her review on Nox, "Although she [Carson] is referred to as a poet, she writes in prose at least as often as she does in verse. Still, only poetry seems capacious enough to encompass her cut-up, *sui-generis* style." (1)

Autobiography of Red has been, particularly, singled out as an example of Carson's play on genre. Writes Line Henriksen, in her article, "The Verse Novel as Hybrid Genre," "The term 'hybrid' appears in practically all the reviews and critical articles that discuss Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red, seemingly solving the difficulty encountered by the reader who wishes to place Carson's text within a category of genre."(35) Critics such as Henrikson, as well as Ian Rae in "Dazzling Hybrids: The Poetry of Ann Carson," and Jes Battis in "'Dangling inside the Word She:' Confusion and Gender Vertigo in Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red," have, additionally, noted that this play with genre parallels her play with gender: Geryon's uncertain sexuality echoes a critical inability to pin down the form of her work. Although Geryon is identified through a male pronoun "he," this pronoun fits Geryon's identity as well as the classification of "narrative poem" fits Carson's text, a category from which, Line Henrikson observes, Autobiography of Red deliberately distances itself by introducing itself as a "Novel in Verse" and by playing with other "generic denominators such as autobiography, photograph, essay, appendix, fragment and romance" (35).

According to Jes Bettis it is impossible to secure a feminine or masculine identity for Geryon because he wavers between monster and human, as well as between literal and figurative. In fact, Sharon Wahl, in her review, "Erotic Suffering: Autobiography of Red and Other Anthropologies," indicates that the latter characteristic caused her much frustration in reading Carson's book:

> Is Geryon really a red monster? Is the reader meant to think the wings, the redness, are literally there? The answer is yes, sometimes; and no. For the most part, it seems that Geryon is not literally red (that is, no one ever

> mentions it, though he frequently thinks it to himself); but the wings are sometimes meant to be real…I found myself fighting the metaphors. It is not that I object to there being metaphorical substance. But the balance between literal and metaphorical readings didn't seem right." (181)

In "Dazzling Hybrids," however, Ian Rae, indicates that such a "frustration" is crucial to reading of Autobiography of Red's exploration of gender and genre. "The fundamental question," Ian Rae writes in his article "Dazzling Hybrids, "is not whether Geryon is he or she, but rather how this monster can negotiate the conflicts entailed by loving and existing in a world more complex than its social, linguistic and literary conventions would suggest." (35) Jes Bettis, moreover, finds significance in the reader's inability to secure a "picture" of Geryon and his physical characteristics:

> Geryon is a physical postulate. His shifting body is at once human (he has hands and feet, he wears clothes, he feels anxiety and desire) and entirely inhuman (he has [maybe] wings, and [maybe] red skin, and he knows himself to be immortal (2)

Bettis indicates that the inability to create a static picture of Geryon forces the reader to confront the unbounded "gender vertigo" in which Geryon resides: "Finding the authentic Geryon is impossible…his identity, like his space, is malleable and performative:" (1)

Although I agree with Bettis that Geryon visually defies gender classification, I believe that it is possible to read Autobiography of Red, as addressing this "gender vertigo," as, specifically, an issue for writing feminine subjectivity, the story of "no story." In other words, Autobiography of Red, as I stated in a previous section, illustrates

Felman's theory that "none *of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*:" That Carson chooses the mode of monstrousness to represent selfhood, in fact, touches upon theories of feminine representation which she, herself, discusses in her essay "Dirt and Desire" when she observes that "The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity." (MOH 133) If selfhood is represented in Autobiography of Red, the rewriting of the rewriting of a myth (Carson rewriting Stesichorus rewriting Homer), where else could femininity insert itself but within the figure of the monster? Barbara Johnson, in her essay, "My Monster/My Self" explains how monstrosity is intimately linked with a woman's account of herself:

> …the monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography. Yet how could it be otherwise, since the very notion of a self, the very shape of human life stories, has always from Saint Augustine to Freud, been modeled on the man? Rousseau's – or any man's – autobiography consists in the story of the difficulty in conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be. The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine imagination. (154)

Geryon confronts similar issues in trying to write an autobiography. His childhood autobiography, as was discussed earlier, does not recount any of his own experiences. It merely describes the "facts" of Homer's epic poem. He finds a medium of expression in

photography, but most of his photographs avoid expressiveness. For example, during his job at local library, "He had taken a number / of photographs but these showed only the shoes and socks of each person." (AR 72) When Geryon finally does take his self-portrait, how he takes and titles this photograph reveals the kind of crisis that Johnson describes as characteristic of women and autobiography. Geryon takes the photograph of himself after overhearing a conversation among philosophers at a bar:

> …the conversation had turned to tails
> *It is not widely known,*
> Yellowbeard was saying, *that twelve percent of babies in the world are born*
> *with tails. Doctors suppress this news.*
> *They cut off the tail so it won't scare the parents. I wonder what percentage*
> *are born with wings,* said Geryon
> into the collar of his overcoat. They went on to discuss the nature of boredom
> ending with a long joke about monks
> and soup that Geryon could not follow although it was explained to him twice. (AR 97)

When he comes back from the bar, Geryon feels inspired to express himself but has no one to talk to, so he uses his camera to take a photograph of himself, a photograph which he entitles, "No Tail":

> I am a philosopher of sandwiches, he decided. Things good on the inside.
> He would like to discuss this with someone.
> And for a moment the frailest leaves of life contained him in a widening happiness.
> When he got back to the hotel room
> he set up the camera on the windowsill and activated the timer, the positioned
> himself on the bed.
> It is a black-and-white photograph showing a naked young man in fetal position.
> He has entitled it "No Tail!"
> The fantastic fingerwork of his wings is outspread on the bed like a black lace
> map of South America. (AR 97)

Not only is Geryon's black-and-white medium inadequate for capturing an essential characteristic of his appearance (since the first fact we know concerning Geryon is that "everything about him was red"), but Geryon's photo caption, "No Tail," in identifying what is absent from the photo rather than what is present, overwrites the second defining feature of Geryon's "monstrosity": his wings. With the photo title, Geryon places his self-portrait within a binary that has absolutely no relevance to the portrait of himself. Tail or no tail does not take in to consideration marks of individuality completely outside that paradigm. What is unique about Geryon is his wings but within the photo's self-framing they remain concealed -- even when they are removed from his overcoat and on display. If one considers the "tail" as an aberrant form of the phallus, then one can translate this situation into an equivalent one for women autobiographers. The "penis/ no penis" definition of sexuality is much like the "tail, no tail" schism. It doesn't account for the presence of features which can positively redefine a woman's identity. In the scheme of "tail, no tail" the woman has no tail and when this absence is all that is recognized, the presence of something else becomes a disfigurement.

If "he/she" is another irrelevant "tail/no tail" category in which to place Geryon, then why do I contextualize Geryon's identity struggles within a crisis of feminine authorship and subjectivity? I would argue that the feminine presence in the text is like Geryon's wings, an intricate pattern on display and yet still concealed, or like Geryon's redness, a color which the medium of choice "can't see." At the same time, there are clues in Autobiography of Red that insist on the relevance of feminine authorship. As Ian Rae in his essay, "Dazzling Hybrids," observes, although Autobiography of Red

translates and interprets the works of male writers such as Stesichorus and Homer, it also makes gestures to contextualize itself within the realm of feminine authorship:

> Carson sets the stories of Stesichorus, Geryon, and Herakles within a framework of epigrams and citations from Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson that, far from being subordinate, assumes equal importance with the male-centred narrative when Stein supplants Stesichorus in the concluding interview. (17)[36]

For example, although Carson's introductory essay to Autobiography of Red, titled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichorus Make?" seems to focus on Stesichorus' writing, the essay is actually framed by Gertrude Stein's, beginning and ending with quotes from her work. A quote from Stein serves as the epigram: "I like the feeling of words doing/ as they want to do and as they have to do" and the first sentence of the essay introduces Stesichorus in a time frame that includes Gertrude Stein's life: "He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet," postponing the more easily-stated fact that Stesichorus was born in 650 B.C (a historiographical "male" time marker), to the second sentence. While Gertrude Stein is not mentioned again until the end of the essay, it is clear, as Ian Rae notes, that she doesn't disappear from the text but rather that it is "a shared talent for fragmentation" between her writing and Stesichorus which informs an analysis of Stesichorus' work. The end of the essay reinforces this link

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[36] Given the nature of my argument, my reading of Autobiography of Red, unlike Rae's, assigns "primary" importance to this framework of feminine authorship.

by concluding with Gertrude Stein. Carson describes a method for reading the fragments of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis*:

> the fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box. "Believe me for meat and for myself," as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake. (AR 7)

Why this connection between scraps of meat and scraps of paper? Rae points us to another essay of Carson's, "The Gender of Sound" in which Carson investigates how this unlikely link (between Stein and red meat) was forged. In "The Gender of Sound," Carson argues that "putting a door on the female mouth (mouth/vagina) has been an important project of patriarchal antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death." (GIG 121) Among the examples Carson provides for this argument is the description of Gertrude Stein's voice by the biographer M.D. Luhan, "Gertrude was hearty. She used to roar with laughter, out loud. She had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved beef." (GIG 121) Carson's analysis of this description points out how Stein's voice is, thereby, portrayed as monstrous:

> these sentences, with their artful confusion of factual and metaphorical levels…projec[t] Gertrude Stein across the boundary of woman and human and animal kind into monstrosity. The simile "she had a laugh like a beefsteak" which identifies Gertrude Stein with cattle is followed at once

> by the statement "she loved beef" indicating that Gertrude Stein ate cattle." (GIG 121)

According to Carson, this insinuation of cannibalism, in addition to McLuhan's portrayal of Stein's "large physical size and lesbianism" results in the "marginalization of [Stein's] personality" as a "way to deflect her writings from literary centrality. If she is fat, funny-looking and sexually deviant she must be a marginal talent, is the assumption." (GIG 121) [37] In this light, Carson's essay on Stesichorus makes a significant gesture in appropriating McLuhan's marginalization of Stein's work, and re-asserting it as the very substance, the very "meat" of the text at hand: "Believe me for meat and for myself."

Emily Dickinson, like Gertrude Stein, also plays a significant framing role in Autobiography of Red, and supports the argument that feminine authorship is a central issue in Autobiography of Red. Emily Dickinson's volcano poem, No. 1748, is the epigram to the "novel in verse," itself:

> The reticent volcano keeps
> His never slumbering plan—
> Confided are his projects pink
> To no precarious man.
>
> If nature will not tell the tale
> Jehovah told to her
> Can human nature not survive
> Without a listener?
>
> Admonished by her buckled lips
> Let every babbler be
> The only secret people keep
> Is Immortality.

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[37] Observations regarding The Gender of Sound" as well as these specific quotes are discussed in Rae's essay (23)

The image of the volcano and its associated themes of interiorization, repression, and secrecy are picked up as main threads in Autobiography of Red (In fact, the book cover for Autobiography of Red showcases a drawing of a volcano) and play an important role in figuring Geryon's inability to express himself to his lover, Herakles. Soon after Geryon begins sexual relations with his brother as a child, he claims "inside" as his space. When he repeats this gesture after starting his adolescent relationship with Herakles, the interiorization becomes linked with the image and story of a volcano. On a long drive to Herakles "hometown," Hades, Herakles points out the nearby volcano and tells Geryon the story of the nearby its eruption in 1923. When Geryon asks "What happened to the town?" Herakles responds:

> *Cooked. There was a survivor – prisoner in the local jail.*
> *Wonder what happened to him.*
> *You'll have to ask my grandmother about that. It's her favorite story – Lava Man.* (AR 47)

That Geryon identifies with the solitary imprisoned survivor, Lava Man, becomes clear in the next section, titled "Lava" which, like Dickinson's poem, uses the dormant volcano as a metaphor for the silent and listening female. The section, "Lava," recounts Geryon's thought process after he awakes in the middle of the night, lying next to Herakles:

> Black central stalled night. He lay hot and motionless…
> What is it like to be a woman
> listening in the dark? Black mantle of silence stretches between them like geothermal pressure.
> Ascent of the rapist up the stairs seems as slow as lava. She listens to the blank space where
> his consciousness is moving toward her. Lava can move as slow as nine hours per inch.
> …
> She wonders if
> he is listening too. The cruel thing is, she falls asleep, listening. (AR 48)

Geryon's thought process not only reveals a kind of identification with "Lava Man's" entrapment but also, at the same time turns "Lava Man" into a figure of feminine silence.

Geryon and Herakles break up soon after the visit to Herakles' home town. When the two meet up again as adults and by chance in the streets of Buenos Aires, Herakles now has a partner, Ancash, but volcanoes, once again, enter in and serve as an important figure for Geryon's inability to communicate himself to Herakles. "Volcanoes" are the reason Herakles has come to South America:

> Herakles explained that he and Ancash were traveling around South America
> together recording volcanoes.
> *It's for a movie,* Herakles added. *A nature film? Not exactly. A documentary*
> *on Emily Dickinson.* (AR 108)

However, the irony of Herakles' perspective on "volcanoes" in the context of Autobiography of Red is clear: not only is Herakles making a *documentary* (a form which Carson indicates in "TV Men," rather than recording events, causes things to "disappear") on Emily Dickinson; he is displaying the volcano, Dickinson's totem of interiority, through a medium that can only record its external features.[38] Herakles' inability to "see" the volcano because of his focus on a visual medium, however, does not hold true for Ancash, Herakles' partner, who focuses solely on audio recordings. It is important to note this since Ancash ends up playing a significant role as a "listener" for Geryon's ultimate expression of selfhood. Ancash is, in fact, the one who empowers

Geryon to see himself as other than a monster. After Ancash first sees Geryon's wings[39] (to the great reluctance of Geryon who wishes to hide them under his coat) (AR 127), he tells Geryon of a legend from a village north of the Brazilian mountains. According to this village, there exist wise ones -- "Yazcamac" or "Eyewitnesses – people who are able to see the inside of a volcano and survive. Geryon asks Ancash, "How do they come back?" and Ancash responds

> *Wings.*
> *Wings? Yes that's what they say the Yazcamac men return as red people*
> *with wings,*
> *all their weaknesses burned away –*
> *and their mortality.* (AR 129)

In providing Geryon with a functional, and purposeful explanation of characteristics which have marginalized him in day-to-day to society, Ancash's description of the Yazcamac as those who become immortal after seeing the volcano, echoes the final line of Dickinson's poem: "The only secret people keep/ Is Immortality"

The significance of Emily Dickinson's presence in Autobiography of Red, then, is not relegated to her role in literary history as a predominant American woman poet; in Autobiography of Red, Dickinson's particular figuration of feminine creativity ends up being the central motif in the central character's struggle with expression and identity. Although Adrienne Rich does not specifically discuss the poem-epigram of

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[39] As Wahl observes, the presence of Geryon's wings only seem to arise in his own thoughts and actions and in scenes with his mother and Ancash. Herakles, Geryon's brother, as well as all other characters in Autobiography of Red, seem oblivious to Geryon's wings. According to Wahl, "One might… say that the people who see and react to Geryon's wings – his mother, and later, Ancash – are the people who understand Geryon, who can see what he really is, where Herakles – physical, restless, focused on sex, as energetic as Geryon is passive – certainly does not" (182).

Autobiography of Red, in her essay, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," her contemplation of Dickinson's use of the volcano as a metaphor for interiority and containment, and how this applies to feminine authorship, in general, seem to apply here, as well:

> Emily Dickinson seemed to tell me that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological, was inseparable from the universal; that there was a range for psychological poetry beyond mere self-expression. Yet the legend of the life was troubling, because it seemed to whisper that a woman who undertook such explorations must pay with renunciation, isolation, and incorporeality. (168)

Rich, additionally, notes how Dickinson's volcano also figures the split a woman writer must maintain internal and external, thought and expression. Quoting Dickinson, "Ourself behind ourself, concealed— / Should startle most," Rich observes "It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live – split between a publicly acceptable persona, and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, the creative, and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous." (175)

At the ending of Autobiography of Red, when Geryon finally uses his wings and flies into the volcano, his recording of this event pays homage to the power of a self-expression which resists specularity. Although the title for this penultimate section is "Photographs: #1748," the first line of the section informs the reader that "It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it." Geryon's has written his autobiography in photographs but in this section, instead of taking his camera into the volcano, he takes a tape recorder:

> bolts of wind like slaps of wood and the bitter red drumming of wing
> muscle on air-
> he flicks Record.
> This is for Ancash, he calls to the earth diminishing below. This is a
> memory of our
> beauty. He peers down
> at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient
> eye and he
> smiles for
> the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep." (AR 145)

An echo of the penultimate line of Dickinson's poem-epigram, the camera for which Geryon smiles is purely figurative. Carson here, as she does in "TV Men: Lazarus," eschews the visual for the audial as the medium of "miracles." The revelation in this moment for Geryon is not simply that his recording is an act of witnessing which refuses the "eye," but that this revelation is possible *because* he has a listener in Ancash. In Carson's poem, Lazarus comes to life not simply because he hears his name being called, but because the medium of the voice forges and maintains an intimacy that has been lost to vision's specularity.

Thus, although I would not refute Bettis', Rae's, or Henrikson's claims that Geryon's gender, just like Autobiography of Red's genre, occupies an indefinable and space, I would argue that Carson is creating through Geryon, a space in which the struggle for feminine subjectivity and autobiography can be read. Here we might revisit Felman's argument regarding women and autobiography: "we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must becom*e a story. And it cannot *become* a story except through the *bond* of *reading*, that is, through the *story of the Other*…" (14)

Chapter 4 – "Becoming of the Eye Between Light and Heart:" Feminine Subjectivity in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's Poetry

4.1 The Language of Science

Much of Anne Carson's work asks us to question the authority of representation or reference -- to undo it, or disempower it by disrupting language's link to the perceptual. Although Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's work, like Carson's, comments upon and/or seeks to disempower the objectifying gaze, it does not provide this kind of critique or revision by undermining representation or scientific observation, but rather, by expanding and complicating these categories, or as Charles Altieri notes in his essay, "Intimacy and Experiment in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *Empathy*," by "suffus[ing] [the referential powers of language] with an excess of investment:"

> she [Berssenbrugge] has a commitment to description and denotation completely at odds with orthodox pomo. Her poetry does not avoid the referential powers of language – it suffuses them with an excess of investment that makes clear the limitations of what Enlightenment thinking at its best can accomplish. Such denotative language ties us to the physical world, but it also expresses a multi-surfaced set of affective engagements of that world that are anchored in description but not reducible to it (2).

Berssenbrugge's poetry seeks to carve a space for feminine subjectivity not by separating itself from the realm of representation but by locating mysticism, poeticism, and "inwardness" within an outward form. One way it does this is by binding the terminology of science with the language of expressiveness.

In Berssenbrugge's poetics, no word or image is sterile and all terminology is subject to imaginative or affective layering. Her book, Endocrinology, provides poignant examples of this ability to blend the languages of science, creativity, and emotion. One would hardly expect lyricism in a book titled for a branch of medicine and replete with words such as "leucocytes," "parabiont" and "B cells," but Berssenbrugge manages to defy expectations with fragments such as these:

> A virus transfers firefly genes to a tobacco plant.
>
> The plant glows in the dark. (*Endocrinology* 2)

Using virus as a metaphoric rather than medical term, Berssenbrugge gives the contagious and transformative nature of "virus" a positive charge by creating a conjectural model where light is a "virus" that can be passed from animal to plant. This contemplation of light places the scientific explanation of the term, "virus," in an imaginative context, a context which also lends to "tobacco," a word normally associated with a common life-threatening addiction, awe-inspiring connotations rather than banal or sinister ones. Because of its use in cigarettes and cigars, tobacco is usually thought of as a substance which is "lit up" rather than a life form with its own "light." Here, however, in creating the poetic image of light-giving plant-life, Berssenbrugge enriches denotative language with conjectural possibilities that recontextualize and expand their normalized associations and connotations.

In Berssenbrugge's work, moreover, words gesture to a multitude of imagistic associations rather than a fixed picture. The format of the book itself points to a relationship between words and images that is flexible and contextual rather than systematic. In Endocrinology, pages are mottled beige/grey paper, and fragments of

poetic text and handwritten notes on white unevenly slips of paper[40] seem to "float on the neutral-colored but active paper" (Alexander 1). Intertwining and surrounding these fragments are dark figures, Kiki Smith's monoprints of organs of the endocrine system. Rather than pointing to a body outside the text, the words and figures take on their own corporality: the layering of fragments gives the book tactile dimension and physicality that it would not have otherwise. This, apparently, was the intent of the collaborators: "We were trying for other textures, layered like the human body upon its own transparencies." (Id.)

The layered and overlapping interaction between Smith's monoprints and Berssenbrugge's fragments transforms the representational relationship between text and figure one would find in a typical medical treatise into an interactive and imaginative one. Although the figures are, indeed, based on the endocrine system, they do not remain fixed within an anatomical context because the surrounding text fragments, rather than point the specificity of the prints, instead, highlight their Rorscharchian qualities. For example, a dark filled-in amoeba like structure attached to a network of lines appears on page three. Given the fragment on page one --"There's circulation around her in intercapillary space, empty or hollow, in relation to organs" -- as well as the fragment on page two -- "Light your intestines. Fluid Lines of light" -- one could imagine this figure represents an organ attached to a network of blood vessels. However, other fragments

[40] Berssenbrugge describes how the book was assembled in a conversation with Laura Hinton: "I wrote the poem with five stanzas. We started cutting my stanzas into lines…We cut and pasted with scissors and scotch tape and, in about 20 minutes made the maquette" (Hinton 18).

disrupt such a conclusion. Indeed, the book seems to issue its own imperative that the reader not rest with any definitive answer. The fragment at the top of page three reads "As if, when you think about something, it already has a frame that's a priori" (3). The fragment immediately beneath this commands us to

> Think before that moment, freedom is inside there.
> Think before the man and woman, their freedom of the animal among silvery trees" (3).

Although the reader's mind is still couched within the anatomical frame provided by the books, title, "Endocrinology," as well as some of its introductory fragments, the text's imperative to think outside this frame as well as its suggestion of an "animal among silvery trees" lends an ambiguity to the figures that lets them waver between both a medical and natural context as well as an "inner" and "outer" context. For example, the drawing underneath this fragment could depict a renal gland but after reading "the animal among silvery trees," it would mostly likely occur to the viewer that it could also depict a caterpillar attached to the underside of a tree branch. That the book's textual fragments intentionally suggest the alternative context of an outdoor landscape for its "internal" figures is supported by other fragments in the book:

> Black rock in dry river, weeds tangled at its base… (7)
>
> A pool in the forest gleams with organic matter…(7)
>
> The bird sings on a strawberry the size of a melon. (12)
>
> She lives on moisture from dew condensed on soil surfaces from night air. (14)
>
> The strawberry sprouts a fantail of petals. (15)

Although endocrinology refers to the medical science of "inside the body," Berssenbrugge's and Smith's book embodies a poetic science where distinction between

inside and outside the body cannot be fixed. The book moves back and forth between anatomical organs and outdoor imagery as though the two were interchangeable, a matter of deciding where to place one's attention: "Blood drips under a white feather of the wounded bird./ A vein puts the organ in the background" (16). Berssenbrugge's text seems to deliberately point us to a perception which can select, focus and unfocus, and inform different lines of thinking. The figures in Endocrinology, as a result, are not static illustrations of pre-designated objects, but active material which a reader processes and re-processes as she reads the book. The fragment immediately beneath the "caterpillar-tree-organ-blood-vessel" figure seems to remind the reader that how her attention shifts and selects is a legitimate function of reading this book: "Which trunks the light hits is an endocrine permutation, a state of being or a physical state" (3).

In Endocrinology, scientificity is not granted authoritative conclusiveness. Berssenbrugge is merely finding in scientific language another resource to explore and exploit, as if this argot were simply another palette of colors to incorporate into her oeuvre. She explains her view on medical terminology as a poetic resource in an interview with Laura Hinton.

> LH: So you studied the Western medical versions, the scientific treatises, on the human body, and did that kind of research – investigator's work before writing the poem?
>
> MB: Yes, I liked the analytic structure and language of these descriptions. I used them in syncopation with the intense emotionality of the work.
>
> LH: This concept of endocrinology – I have to say it's a mysterious aspect of medicine and the body's system for me.
>
> MB: Well, only scientists call it a "system." It doesn't call itself a "system." (Hinton 17)

Indeed, any statements in the book which seem to impart medical knowledge are always positioned in such a way that they become part of a question. In one poetic fragment, Berssenbrugge poses the question "What is physical light inside the body?" (8) The two lines beneath this question seem to relay two types of responses. One is a metaphoric response, the other a scientific one:

> What is physical light inside the body?
> A white cloth in a gold and marble tomb, to focus the expression of the tomb.
> Shortly after phagocytosing material, leucocytes increase their oxygen consumption and chemically produce light. (8)

Both responses yield a similar image of light inside a dark space. However, only one "response" directly answers the question, for while the third sentence, "Shortly after phagocytosing material…" explains the process by which light is chemically produced inside the body, phrased as it is, this sentence answers an unasked question "how?" and not the stated question "*what* is physical light inside the body?" Only the second line, "A white cloth in a gold and marble tomb" produces a frame through which to comprehend the question "what's…?" request for context by considering the qualifying adverbial clause introduced by "inside." Providing the spatial metaphor of a tomb for the human body, the second sentence considers the architecture of "inside" by casting it as a dark, closed, private and sacred space. The second sentence, moreover, reflects on what illumination means with this context, to "focus the expression of the tomb," to locate meaning through attention. The scientific explanation of how light is produced chemically within the body extends a response to the initial question but without the intervening metaphor of the tomb, it would remain an unanswered one.

In its concern for *how* light can direct attention -- how it can "focus the expression the tomb" – rather than for *what* is being lit, Endocrinology, exemplifies Altieri's aforementioned claim that Berssenbrugge's poetry "makes clear the limitations of what Enlightenment thinking at its best can accomplish." (2) According to Blumenberg in his article, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth" the scientific imperatives of the Enlightenment made seeing a process of examination: "In the idea of 'method,' which originates with Bacon and Descartes, 'light' is thought of as being at man's disposal. Phenomena no longer stand in the light; rather, they are subject to the lights of an examination…" In Berssenbrugge's poetry, however, light is constantly shifting, refocusing, positioning and re-positioning so that any particular image pictured by the reader is only a temporary variant in the process of reading: "Which trunks the light hits is an endocrine permutation, a state of being or a physical state." Rather than illuminating a body or bodies, casting an "image upon the mind's eye" (Pound) Endocrinology attempts to, itself, embody the fluctuating interaction between perception and imagination.

A scientific outlook, then, is not absent from Berssenbrugge's work but it is also not detached from mystical, poetic, or psychological ones. Intersecting and overlapping with affective language science becomes in Berssenbrugge's work not as a language of definitive answers, but a language of experimentation and of questioning. As Megan Adams notes in her article on "Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and the Uses of Scientific Language,"

> the novel way in which she used scientific terms and ideas… subverts the authoritarian pretensions of the language it employs. She incorporates

> scientific language while remaining completely free of its traditionally loaded implications – i.e., that nature is the brute observed and human consciousness is alienated (53)

Endocrinology does not mock scientific language or figuration. In fact, the book seems to find delight in medical material and medical explanations. However, the asystematic, creative, and imaginative context which Berssenbrugge and Smith provide for this material subvert its claims as a language of answers and of proof. Moreover, Berssenbrugge's interconnection of affective language with scientific terminology reflects her desire to embody feminine subjectivity in her work. As she, herself, has said in an interview with Michele Gerber Klein, "I've tried to feminize scientific language, to make continua between emotion and thought, between the concrete and abstract."(2)

4.2 The Fragmented Feminine

While Berssenbrugge's work attempts to locate and write a new way of seeing, it also addresses how a masculinist scientific way of seeing can create a crisis in feminine subjectivity, specifically the fracturing of self into a surveyor and surveyed, wherein a woman "turns herself into an object – and most particularly *an object of vision: a sight*." [italics mine] (John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 47). In "Honeymoon," for example, Berssenbrugge uses a Plathian figure -- the "doll" -- to signify an objectified construct of femininity which the speaker of the poem cannot fully inhabit and from which she feels estranged:

> She has to get right the occasion for visualizing his concept of the doll, but she cannot. While
> she cannot experience the meaning of his assessments about the doll, it seems rags to her. So

> she has to justify her blindness to its hunger, for example. She would say, I think
> she has eaten already. She would scatter crumbs on her own dress to prove this. (*Empathy* 73)

As in Plath's work, "the doll" in "Honeymoon" is a fixed image or structure of femininity provided by an artificial form. Subjectivity is split so that "I" speaks through this artificial double, this "she" who, as in Plath's work (see discussion of "Mirror," "Tale of a Tub," "In Plaster" in first chapter), has no natural voice and who must communicate through gesture. The vocalization of "I think she has eaten already" requires the accompanying visual evidence of "scattered crumbs on her own dress." This kind of divided subject is also present in "Alakanak Break-Up"

> This is where they have concentrated you, in order to be afraid
> or in order to recreate the line between your mind and your mind
> on the other side of a blue crack in the ice, so you can sit
> facing each other, like ice floes folded up and cut up
> and piled up against each other, and so you know enough to stop
> as soon as you lose your direction. (Empathy 17)

The metaphor of "your mind" and "your mind" facing each other are depicted as ice floes "folded up" "cut up" and "piled up." The thinking subject is confined to fixed structures which inhibit errancy or improvisation, reminding the self "to stop/ as soon as you lose your direction" (i.e., because I can't resist the pun, to *not* "think outside the block.")

"Tan Tien," is another poem in Empathy which addresses self-fragmentation as self-estrangement. In "Tan Tien," not being able to a "center" for the self is contiguous with not being able to locate a listener or an empathetic addressee:

> If being by yourself separates from your symmetry, which is
> the axis of your spine in the concrete sense, but becomes a suspension
> in your spine like a layer of sand under the paving stones of a courtyard
> or on a plain, you have to humbly seek out a person who can listen to you,

> on a street crowded with bicycles at night, with their bells ringing. (*Empathy* 14)

Without a listener, the speaker, who refers to herself alternatively through the pronouns, "I" "you" and "she," turns subjectivity from a pre-defined position of the self to a desire *to* position the self:

> And any stick or straight line in your hand can be your spine
> like a map she is following in French of Tan Tien.. She wants space to fall
> to each side of her like traction, not weight dispersed within a mirror. At any time,
> an echo of what she says will multiply against the walls in balanced,
> dizzying jumps like a gyroscope in the heat, but she is alone. (*Empathy* 14)
>
> Later she would remember herself as a carved-figure and its shadow on a blank board,

The speaker does not feel self-centered; she feels divided and doubled. "She" is located outside of herself, her spine, what one would normally consider as the median of one's own body is projected outward into the " layer of sand under the paving stones of a courtyard," or "any stick or straight line in your hand." Rather than experiencing the traction and gravity of her own body's three-dimensional solidity, her "self" resides within a slippery two-dimensional representation, her "weight dispersed within a mirror." Solidity, like self-centeredness, can only be projected into an artificial double, "a carved-figure and its shadow on a blank board." Self-estrangement is echoed by the speaker's situation – she is in a foreign land reading a map in a foreign language. Tools which normally would aid a person in navigation – a map and a gyroscope – here only repeat the sentiment of feeling "lost."

"Tan Tien" moreover, addresses the construction of self as contingent upon pre-established notions of space. Like the poem preceding it (The Blue Taj), "Tan Tien"

contains an allusion to a royal and sacred architectural construct. Although, Tan Tien (or Tan T'ien or Dantian") is a term which refers to an internal focal point for meditation, the poem content seems to invite its reader to misread "Tan Tien" as "Tian Tan." "Tian Tan," literally translated as the "Altar of Heaven," is a temple situated in southeastern Beijing. Built in early 15th-century China at the same time as the construction of the imperial palace, the Forbidden City, the temple and its grounds were turned into a public park in 1949. Although the poem, "Tan Tien" seems to refer to locating a center within the self with such phrases as "If being by yourself separates from your symmetry…" or "…she is her balancing stick," phrases such as the ones below direct our thoughts to the outer, public space of "Tian Tan:"

> …She can't tell
> which bridge crossed the moat, which all cross sand now, disordered with
> footsteps
>
> …the paving stones of a courtyard
>
> …Tan Tien is a park, now. The stick isn't really the temple's bisection
> around her,
>
> …Only the emperor
> could walk its center line. Now anyone can imagine how it felt
> to bring heaven news…

Although "Tan Tien" is a poem about trying to locate a center within the self, the construction of an internal space as well as the location of "center" cannot occlude processing external surroundings and external context, an architecture that has already been set in place.

"Blue Taj," the first poem in Empathy and the poem which precedes "Tan Tien," in fact, suggests that conceptualization of spatial constructs is key to our understanding of how the self connects to the world. "Blue Taj" uses architectural metaphors to explore

the interaction of the idealized and the actual, a theme made evident by the first line: "There is your 'dream' and its 'approximation'" (1) The ensuing lines which contain words such as "labyrinth," "walls," "house," and "plaster" situate the "'dream' and its 'approximation'" as spatial constructs within the speaker's imagination, and the speaker takes on the role of the architect – an architect's whose vision has quickly become a process of negotiation with the "builder" and the "client:"

> There is your 'dream' and its 'approximation.'
> Sometimes the particular attributes of your labyrinth
> seem not so ghastly. More often blue shimmering
> walls of the house crack with a sudden drop
> in temperature at night, or the builder substitutes
> cobalt plaster, which won't hold at this exposure. (1)

It becomes clear by the second stanza that the stakes of this "negotiation" are more intimate than the architectural metaphor might at first suggest.

> Your client vetoes a roof garden, often
> because of money, or he likes to kiss you at dawn
> and you want to sleep late. Sometimes a person
> holds out for the flawless bevelled edge, but might
> end up with something half-built, its inlay
> scavenged long ago… (1)

The poem's titular allusion to the "Taj Mahal," the mausoleum built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, takes on a broader significance with the introduction of this lover. The speaker's "Blue Taj" is not just an ideal construct; it is an ideal construct whose purpose is to contain "love." It is an allusion which reminds the reader that the poem is not just creating a metaphor where "ideal house" represents "ideal love" – it is indicating that desire and spatial designs are intertwined in a person's desire to make sense of our relationship with others. Berssenbrugge work, however, resists architectural compartmentalizations as well as the

ideas of "outside" and "inside" that are implicit in representation, as an adequate way of communicating. Her poetry, as Altieri writes, "struggle[s] against pressures to theatricalize or thematize or otherwise flatten intimacy into idea and the dynamics of person into the elements we attribute to character." (3)

Both The Blue Taj and Tan Tien are poems that explore a subjectivity of contingency, of a desire and a need to create a position, rather than attempting to speak from an already established position. This is a subjectivity whose boundaries of "within" and "without" are in constant negotiation. That Berssenbrugge locates this as a particularly feminine predicament in her book, Empathy, is subtly suggested by her use of pronouns. For example, in "Tan Tien," the speaker imagines that "he" feels a centeredness of self that she does not

> she imagines he felt symmetry as flight after his fast among seven meteorites
> in the dark. He really felt like a globe revolving within a globe. (15)

Berssenbrugge, the writer, herself, has indicated in an interview with Laura Moriarty that this is an issue that informs her writing, the desire to give shape to a feminine point-of-view

> …the more I experience the more I'm becoming curious about all the sublime experiences that happen to men and women, to human beings, that are not in literature, many of which are the experiences of women, and that is curious to me. And I'm drawn to say that now I think, though I never knew it before, that men and women are very different… and that the experiences of women that are not in literature are seeking a form, which has not yet been given. (Moriarty 7)

Unlike Plath's work, however, Berssenbrugge's work does *not* create a theatrical stage in which dramatic personae (or "subjects") can speak and emote. Plath's work points out the traps of a woman occupying a visible role in a public theater through a hyperbolization of these figures. Berssenbrugge's work, however, seeks to move beyond the lure and traps of representation. It's important, then, not simply to recognize not just the moments in Berssenbrugge's work which allude or refer to pre-established forms or notions of subjectivity and sight, but how Berssenbrugge's work relays the "seeking [of] a form, which has not yet been given."

4.3 Hidden Continuities

In "Honeymoon," Berssenbrugge includes "the doll" to signify a representative form of femininity that creates a fragmented notion of self. The poem does not simply portray how this form of representation fragments and estranges selves; it also indicates how it impedes the self from making meaningful connections with other people. What Berssenbrugge, ultimately, points out in "Honeymoon" is that this sense of fragmentation belongs to naturalized concepts of representation rather than n inherent property of representation, itself. Rather than depicting a person or persons in representative fragments, then, "Honeymoon" attempts to define "levels of representation" by tapping into a way of seeing oneself and others that necessarily realizes the partial and temporal limitations of perspective.

> Though relations with oneself and with other people seem negotiated in terms secretly confirmed
> by representation, her idea of the person's visibility was not susceptible to representation. No matter
> how emphatically a person will control his demeanor, there will be perspectives she cannot foresee or

> direct, because there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which representation can reach,
> the way the part of a circle can be just the memory of a depth, the surface inside its contour,
> like the inside of a body emits more feeling than its surrounding, as if
> the volume or capacity of relations would only refer to something inside, that I can't see,
> that the other person and I keep getting in the way of… (*Empathy* 68)

Noting that "there will perspectives she cannot foresee / or direct, because there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which representations can reach," the poem thereby attempts to define a visible fragment as something that is not "broken off" or complete in of itself, but rather as something necessarily incomplete and temporal, something which always has a hidden continuity that must be invisible to the seer.[41]

> She would wish his wish was to penetrate her behaviour by means of referring to what she is feeling,
> in order to reach the same place her reference to herself occupies, that is, before
> she would express the feeling
> …
> she begins to require honeymoon as a level of representation,
> something which we might call
> an application of honey onto a bar of light, or the part of the deep orange moon that is hidden or the part
> that is not hidden by clouds, having a sense of, but no analysis of her seeing, that will explain
> her feeling about an application, how the ambiguity seems to alter "how much" is seen. (*Empathy* 74)

In this passage, Berssenbrugge points to an imagistic resonance in "honeymoon" that exceeds what its dictionary definition might provide. Here, "honeymoon" becomes,

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[41] In fact, "Honeymoon" was re-published in book-length form and titled Hiddeness. (Hinton 14)

through metonymic re-conceptualization, not only that which engages multiple picturing possibilities but also that which addresses what eludes picturing:

> something which we might call
> an application of honey onto a bar of light, or the part of the deep orange
> moon that is hidden or the part
> that is not hidden by clouds.

Although Ben Lerner is not discussing this poem specifically, his observation regarding Berssenbrugge's combination of concrete and abstract language is relevant here: "note the juxtaposition of an abstract vocabulary…with direct descriptive speech…This combination of abstract and concrete rhetorical registers invites the reader to think beyond local percepts …" (2)

A fragment is often viewed as something that has been broken or broken off – such as a shard of glass or a piece of pottery. In this way of seeing, the fragment signifies that a "whole" has been damaged and now is irretrievable. In Berssenbrugge's work, however, a fragment simply points out a hidden continuity where the "whole" is a composite of what is seen and not seen, like the moon when part is illuminated and part is in shadow. For example, although "Alakanak Break-Up" points to a fragmented sense of self where a "blue crack in the ice" creates a place where "your mind and your mind/…sit/facing each other, like ice floes folded up and cut up/ and piled up against each other…" the poem, itself, in fact, responds to this portrait of constriction and fragmentation by indicating, in the following stanza, that this state of being is created by a selective focus that does not encompass a larger picture. Ice Floes are not pack ice – they are pieces of sea ice which are free-moving:

> Then, if you are on the ocean, with poor visibility, with no wind
> and you cannot be seen, please go around the outside of an ice

> floe, because the ocean has dust particles, which will sparkle
> and indicate the direction of the sun, she says. (*Empathy* 17)

By switching its focus from the ice itself to the moving and fluid ocean beneath them the poem recontextualizes the fragmented status of the speaker as simply a selective way of seeing, a way of seeing that ignores that which is not readily visible, that which is beneath or beyond and which can only be represented by looking for "dust particles, which will sparkle." The majority of the poem, in fact, seems to accentuate the link between phenomena and perception as that which can be affected by subjective focus but also, and more importantly, can never encompassed by it :

> Here is the event horizon. You can focus on a cone-shaped rock
> in the bay. You can make it larger and closer than the ice
> surrounding it, because you have the power to coax the target.
> This breaks up your settlement in a stretch of infinity. (*Empathy* 16)

Here, focus and scale are depicted as a matter of mechanics of vision and "you" has the "power" to manipulate those mechanics. As Megan Simpson writes in her book, Poetic Epistemologies,

> Because the perceiver's view is as much affected by her own intentionality as by the events occurring outside of her consciousness her own position… is in flux rather than stable, just as the moving landscape she inhabits and beholds. (Simpson 137)

However, the poem reminds us that a landscape has a flux and breadth which can never be framed by subjective intentionality. In fact, it indicates that subject's intent to create "fragmented" representations is inspired by the inability to contain or filter visual stimuli:

> When she turns, the ice she had been standing on is changing into
> foam and is about to drift away. It rumbles as it is changing.
> She watches it recede until it is a slit of light entering the brain,
> because the brain is protecting itself against the light. (*Empathy* 16)

Moreover, the larger context for "Alakanak Break-Up" temporializes any imagery of fragmentation within the poem itself. "Alakanak Break-Up" forms only part of a trilogy "water poems" which were written in combination with dance pieces. The "water trilogy" of dance poems includes two poems in Empathy -- "Alakanak Break-Up" and "Fog -- and the book-length Mizu. ("Mizu" is "water" in the Five Elements of Japanese philosophy)[42] Within the context of water, the fragmentation featured in "Alakanak Break-Up" becomes not a broken but a *temporary* state of being and seeing. Like water, this state can be flowing, vaporous, or frozen. The poem, "Fog," acknowledges this:

> This fog in space and light and dark is analogous to the solid ice of a very pure environment, and
> how it cracks and gets water, from one stage to another. (*Empathy* 46)

That this trilogy of water poems were written to accompany choreographed pieces performed by the Morita Dance Company,[43] also points to a context where images

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[42] See Miller, Jeff (June 1996). "5 Element Codes Part 1." Ninjutsu - Ura & Omote." (http://www.ninjutsu.co.uk/uraomote/96/june.html#elem)
and "Five elements (Japanese philosophy) – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_elements_%28Japanese_philosophy%29)

[43] Both dance and poetry were essential to the creative process of these poems since neither the poems nor the choreography prefigured the other. The process of creating both dance and text was described by Berssenbrugge in an interview with Laura Moriarty as a collaborative one:

> MB: … I would look at movement and put pieces of language with it. Or I would read something and she would… I would think about that with her. We developed performances with simultaneous lines of movement, spoken text, and improvised music, including Kodo drumming.
>
> LM: Was the poem written before?

change and continue rather than remain fixed. Moreover, dance does not simply call attention to the moving body; gestures also create lines or carve out shapes in space, the way fog emphasizes light and depth – the relationality of figures rather the properties of any particular one. In dance, there is potential to make pictures or forms with the body, but these are usually only pauses or poses (frozen blocks) within the fluid (water-like) movement of the choreography – fragments which can't be isolated from the context of temporality.

Fluidity and temporality in poetic imagery is characteristic of Berssenbrugge's work and the length of Berssenbrugge's lines in Empathy (in which both "Fog" and Alakanak Break-Up appear) accentuates this. In Empathy, the lines seem to spill over into one another. They are, in fact, so long that the pages of the book are published in landscape rather than portrait layout. Berssenbrugge explains the reasoning behind this stylistic choice in her interview with Laura Moriarty:

> MB: I've really been trying to create an experience in the reader in which they are changed but they can't reiterate what happened or how it happened. So a long line helps me in doing that because you can't grasp the whole line in your mind.
>
> LM: So that you are forgetting the beginning by the time you get to the end of it.
>
> MB: In a way, at least you can't see it with your eye. So you have to start letting go.

MB: No, it was made together. (2)

Berssenbrugge's poems, while imagistic, do not allow the reader to hold on to these images or fix them in a visible whole. Instead, the poems ask us to "let go" to let appearances fade and flow into others.

The reason fragmentation is only every couched within a temporal flow in Berssenbrugge's work is because her poetry explores the kind of seeing which is often neglected by a scientific imperative to examine and observe objects. Carson critiques this imperative by disempowering seeing as sense in her poetry, creating situations where perception is perplexed and where the ear must be privileged over the eye. Berssenbrugge's poetry, however, finds resistance to naturalized contemporary concepts of seeing (which are embedded in scripts of specularity) within the dynamics of seeing, itself. In Berssenbrugge's work, sight is the primary sense but Berssenbrugge makes us more conscious of its complexities, variations, limitations and mysteries. She makes sight more *sensual.* Writes Simpson,

> Not only is sight more consistently engaged than the other senses in her complexly sensual poetry, but also her vocabulary is concentrated with perceptual and visual terms. Her poetry offers readers a sensual experience of seeing that is almost addictive; it is difficult to look away from a poem, even as the poem itself is ceaselessly engaged in looking. Throughout the poems in Empathy especially, objects frequently appear or disappear; perceivers are distracted, attentive; they gaze and glance. Descriptions of perspectives, angles, views, distances, and spatial relations comprise a primary gesture in Berssenbrugge's poetics…" (134)

Unlike scientific and methodological seeing where objects are framed within "the lights of an examination" (page) Berssenbrugge's poetry gives rise to a seeing which can be temporal or partial, a seeing which involves perspective, position, distance, occlusion, luminosity, forgetting, loss, desire, and dreams -- types of seeing which do not allow for fixed representations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's last work, The Visible and The Invisible, proves particularly useful with engaging this notion of vision. In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty does not overturn his investigations of perception; rather, he shows how the visible elements of perception are necessarily intertwined with and dependent upon the unrepresentable (or invisible) dimensions of humanity. Seeing takes place within this chiasm of visible and invisible "since the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it…" (136). Like Merleau-Ponty, Berssenbrugge's work does not denounce representation *per se;* rather, she investigates the unrepresentable needs, desires, and/or anxieties which engender it. As she has said in one of her interviews, "One of my subjects is the continuum between material and immaterial" Desire, anxiety, need and perception for a continuum in Berssenbrugge's poetics, and this is a point upon which the poet, herself, has commented in her interview with Laura Moriaty. Moriarty quotes a phrase from Berssenbrugge's poem, "Empathy," "An idea is a wish" and Berssenbrugge elaborates upon this:

> MB "I think an image is like that too, it's like a wish.."
>
> LM So that an idea has a kind of … again we are coming back to a kind of physicality. If you have an idea and you want to picture it, then that would be an image…
>
> MB Yeah, I think it's a continuous… it's a continuum between desires and ideas and images…

So, although Berssenbrugge acknowledges and attempts to portray this continuum "between desires and ideas and images" in her work, she also investigates the *desire or need* for fixed representations and for an architecture in which to house them. This desire, according to the poems in Empathy, is largely formed by anxiety. "Fog" acknowledges the anxieties and desires that seek out definitive forms for other people but also indicates the isolation and alienation that can result from negotiating with fixed portraits of them.

> The way we call a complex of intervals with which you depict the family member, his emotion
> with respect to you. As if the person were a piece of rose-colored glass.
>
> Would he have the same emotion in a crowd as a piece of rose-colored paper?
>
> A storyline develops based on your moving from one breath to another, and you start to want to
> continue it, like a span of good health or exceptional beauty. You want to continue it forever, and
> your memory gets involved, in how you perceive the space around you and the human beings or
> descendents in the space.
>
> You will eventually feel so empty inside, among your family and in your memory of your family,
> that even while you continue breathing, your breath will not bring volume or space into your lungs. (*Empathy* 49)

The poem warns us against objectifying the other as if s/he were a "piece of glass" or a "piece of rose-colored paper," creating characters of others so that one can create both narrative and architecture to contain them. This objectifying "vision" of others, especially of the ones we love, impedes real interaction with them because it doesn't provide for what we don't and can't see in the other, what makes the other "other."

In the poem "Fog," Berssenbrugge explores seeing in environment where representations cannot be clearly defined and where such anxieties would arise. In fog, the textures of a person or thing are less discernable so while shapes and silhouettes may stand, there is low contrast and blurring. Writes Berssenbrugge, "There is no territory in a fog environment" (46). Analytical language which attempts to parse and separate thoughts, images, and ideas into separate visible entities is, here, hobbled. With the powers of observation and examination altered, the speaker has to describe what it means to acquire knowledge through a different way of seeing, a seeing which is not aided by illumination. This means trying to find a syntax, a vocabulary, and/or a poetics which can communicate a different kind of perception and a different way of knowing. However, navigating these unknowns pose difficulties:

> Lack of clarity within your environment is tormenting. It is felt as shameful. We feel we do not
> know how to even out a place for ourselves, where we should know our way about. But we get
> along very well inside buildings, without these distinctions, and without knowing our way about
> the decrepit structures. (46)

The predicament in this is not only that "seeing in fog" requires a different vocabulary for perception and knowledge but that one writes with the uncertainty of having an audience, a sympathetic listener:

> She can describe for you the phenomenon of feeling her way through the fog. For whom does she describe this?
>
> What ignorance can her description eliminate?
>
> Which person is supposed to understand her description, people who have been lost in fog before,
> or people who have lived on the desert and never seen what she would describe? (43-44)

While the poem depicts the difficulties of getting lost or losing ground, it also indicates that this loss forces subjects to figure potentially new and fertile ground for communication, a space in which to feel what is "between" rather than what is distinct.

> In any serious interaction between them, not knowing your way about extends to the essence of
> what is between them. What can appear emotional is caused by the emission of energy out of her
> body, which you feel, but there is also such a thing as "feeling something as luminous, (46)

This lack of clarity, this ability to "feel something as luminous" is the kind of space which Altieri identifies in Berssenbrugge's work as place for exploring the kind of intimacy than Enlightenment models of subjectivity (models which posit an "I" as subject and the world as disconnected object) do not permit,[44] a space where "intimacy is less a matter of coming to know the other better than of learning to enter the space created by the desire to give another access to one's energies as they extend beyond what communication can contain." (10-11)

"Fog," acknowledges the need to create a stable image/concept of the other but asks us to suspend and explore the process by which we form such representations and to engage in the indefiniteness of seeing and knowing. Therefore when the poem ascribes solidity to a person or her memory of a person, this is only a temporary picture within the

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[44] As Susan Bordo notes in her essay, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," "Descartes provides the first real phenomenology of the mind, and one of the central results of that phenomenology is the disclosure of the deep epistemological alienation that attends the sense of mental interiority: the enormous gulf that must separate what is conceived as occurring "in here" from that which correspondingly, must lie "out there." (443)

flow of text, for the continuation of the writing always allows for a "focus" or specificity to dissolve:

> Thinking of him as the color of polished silver or other metal.
>
> The fog of the way we feel our way into this focus, seeking by feeling, lies in the indefiniteness of
> the concept of continuing focus, or distance and closeness, that is, of our methods of comparing densities between human beings.
>
> Is foggy that which conceals forms? And does fogginess conceal forms because it obliterates light
> and shadow, the way light obliterates or shadow obliterates, also?
>
> Black does, but fog doesn't necessarily take away the luminosity of a color. (48)

While fog does not "illuminate" the details or properties of a thing, it "doesn't take away from the luminosity of a color" In fact according to a photography website dedicated to photographic in fog, "fog makes the air much more relfective to light… Water droplets in the fog or mist make light scatter a lot more than it would otherwise. This greatly softens light, but it also makes light streaks visible from concentrated or directional light sources."[45] While Fog makes light more visible and while its directionality can be identified, it is a light which does not "illuminate" an object and it is a light whose source or "subject" is obscured. Writes Berssenbrugge, "… we appreciate the fog, as the power to make the space continue beyond the single/ perception, into raw material or you of the body, like a body of light."

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[45] "How to Take Photos in Fog, Mist, or Haze:" (http://www.cambridgeincolour.com/tutorials/fog-photography.htm)

Berssenbrugge's poetry asks us to embrace the possibilities, the temporality, and the levels of representation rather than the definitiveness of it, to reach beyond the pre-established definition of a form, space, or color and to address its multiple contexts and evocations. Although Berssenbrugge's poetry points out a script for seeing, it is more interested in investigating outside and around the script.

4.4 Feminine Phenomenologies

Hélène Cixous is, here, relevant to a discussion of Berssenbrugge's work. Both writers seem to propose a positive and productive means of defetishizing the masculine singular perspective by expressing experiences and subjects that are multiple, bodily, enmeshed, uncontainable, unorganizable, volcanic, and which can't be fixed within a particular representation. In "Castration or Decapitation" Cixous defines this form of expression as "feminine écriture," "a feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending…" (53). Cixous elaborates on this concept in "The Laugh of the Medusa,"

> Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous criss-crossings of the others ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to let them through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity. (88-89)

While Cixous seems to locate potential for anti-representational errancy in the nature of writing, Berssenbrugge's seems to locate this by exploring the phenomenology of seeing,

itself: how and why seeing gives rise to representations and how these representations are always unraveled when one pays attention to the temporal and interactive dynamics of sight.

As mentioned previously, in "Alakanak Break-Up," Berssenbrugge points to how fixed representations resist exploration, delimiting a place "where they have concentrated you, in order to be afraid/ or in order to recreate the line between your mind and your mind." Fixed forms, ice floes are "folded up and cut up/ and piled up against each other…so you know enough to stop/ as soon as you lose your direction." However, the context of these "ice floes" in a trilogy of "dance" poems which feature water in both vaporous and liquid form, accentuates that these "fixed" forms are only a modality in seeing, a temporary state

The water poems remind of us the variability in seeing since they explore the nature of sight in different atmospheres. "Mizu," is one of the five elements in Japanese philosophy which refers to both the element of water as well as its properties:

> 水 *Sui* or *mizu*, meaning "Water", represents the fluid, flowing, formless things in the world. Outside of the obvious example of rivers and the like, plants are also categorized under *sui*, as they adapt to their environment, growing and changing according to the direction of the sun and the changing seasons. Blood and other bodily fluids are represented by *sui*, as are mental or emotional tendencies towards adaptation and change. *Sui*

> can be associated with emotion, defensiveness, adaptability, flexibility, suppleness, and magnetism.[46]

The fluidity of the book-length poem, Mizu, is reflected in the accordion style of the book. There are no page breaks in Mizu -- only page folds; the book can be extended across the floor into one long page. A thick aqua blue line across the top of the page (it looks like a watercolor paint stroke) not only emphasizes this unbroken continuity, but reminds us that the context of the poem and its images is, primarily, underwater. The poem loosely follows the narrative of Urashima Tarō, a boy of Japanese legend who saves a turtle's life and is rewarded for this with a visit to *Ryūgū-jō*, the palace of Ryūjin, the Dragon God, under the sea where he lives for three days. However, when the boy returns home he realizes that three hundred years and not three days have passed. According to some versions of the legend the boy (now man) transforms into a crane. (Rosenberg). What Berssenbrugge emphasizes in the poem is the boy's adaptability -- how he must change with change. First, his perception of the world changes through the medium of water: movements become slower and thicker, colors become more solid but not sharper, and how the significance of certain sounds shift in their priorities. At first the boy's senses remain relevant to the world above. He translates his perceptions into what they would mean "above water." However, the boy in adapting to his medium, finds a new scale of relativity and context for his perceptions within water.

> If the boy goes under the water, the water is thick air

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[46] "Five elements (Japanese philosophy) – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_elements_%28Japanese_philosophy%29)

> that skews the direction of each of his bones as he enters…
> …
> ...His voice comes from a long distance away, like the voice
> of an old man, but is really adjusting to curved
> earbones…
> ……..
> And he was in reverse of the people's routine. So he could watch
> a big net drift down, which glittered at first with caked
> salt, then turned black as tangled seaweed swelled.
>
> At first he tried to compensate for the water's color and weight.
> ……..
> But after a while the undulation of a frond was no longer slow
> to him, and the transfer of water from one place to another
> became a sound instead of the background to real noise, and also
> what he had previously called "reverberation" became a sound.
> Bright orange and bright yellow grew more solid, but not sharper.
>
> These things happened as he breathed. The turtle increased
> to his own size.

When the boy returns home he finds that he can't simply change back because the world has moved on without him:

> The bamboo grove is filled with snow.
> Where his house had been were desolate piles of stakes
> And empty pots and tubs. He stamped each foot to
> Prove he was real. None of the people lived there.

Faced with the loss of a contextual present, the boy escapes to a world created by his memories and imagination:

> So he tried to think back to his time on the sea floor. He
> began to recreate inside his mind each crevasse and the
> arrangement of plants and the people he had visited there.
> His memory was a glimmer on thin underside of the bone at the top
> Of his skull, and it would strike a stripe of violet or
> Orange red, which would resonate as he went on to the next
> Thing that had happened to him, each tone lasting three
> Or four beats into the next tone, so that when he remembered
> His ascent, in order for the color to continue onto white
> Shore, it had to break a piece out of the skull, and its
> Vapor enveloped him.

> And he became a crane, able to disguise his escape as migration,
> As if an old crane would come back in the spring.

The boy, now man, adapts to absence, desolation, and loss by creating his a world of "inner perception," where he can live within the retrieved memories of colors and shapes in the ocean. To give these memories temporality, however, requires that the boy change as well – "in order for the color to continue onto white/ shore, it had to break a piece out of the skull" and in switching to this context for perception, where his focus shifts to the flow of his thoughts and memories, his medium becomes not water but air: "and its/ vapor enveloped him."

By changing the medium for vision in Mizu, Berssenbrugge reminds us that perceptions and the meanings we make of them are always contextual, imbedded within a network of relationships and priorities that can change. In fact, the titles of Berssenbrugge's works usually point to a relationship, to a network of meanings and possibilities rather than to a specific thing. Although Berssenbrugge's poetry thickens the connection and makes visible the connection of perception with language, it also insists on the imprecision and contextual nature of this connection. As she states in her poem, "Honeymoon:"

> She is not the name of a person, nor there of a place, but they are connected with names.
> …
> Why science does not use a word like she or there, is why the hand cannot make a sharp edge in the sand. (*Empathy* 70)

"Mizu," for example, while referring to water also refers to a concept of adaptability and change and this is the main concern of the poem. However, the network or concept which entitles the work does not necessarily agree with its dictionary definition.

Endocrinology, while on the surface might seem to suggest a study of the "inside" of the body actually investigates what "inside" means and in so doing, collapses any easy distinction between "inside" and "outside" the body. Likewise, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, empathy means "The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation," but this definition does not adequately sum up Berssenbrugge's poetic contemplation of empathy in Empathy. Although Berssenbrugge's work portrays objectification, ultimately her poetry refuses fixed "objects of contemplation." As Altieri explains,

> …intimacy is beautifully defined as being able to refer to what someone is feeling at the site where the person enters the expressive process rather than at the site produced by the representation . So the need for multiple perspectives now enters time, or enters a sense of the richness and evocativeness of dealing with objects and persons in terms of their ways of being present in what unfolds out of them. (9)

Although Berssenbrugge's poetry realizes that projection is part of the equation in creating links between things and people, ultimately her poetry indicates that "fully comprehending" another is impossible and representation's or reference's attempt to do this only impedes our connection with ourselves and the world. Berssenbrugge's work, asks us to acknowledge vision as a continuous and contextual process.

4.5 Bodies of Becoming and Between

Berssenbrugge's poetry seems to answer Merleau-Ponty's request for a philosophy that doesn't assume established boundary lines and limitations:

> Philosophy must engage experiences which have not yet be "'worked over,' that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both 'subject' and 'object,' both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them…Seeing, speaking, even thinking…are experiences of this kind, both irrecusable and enigmatic (130).

In much of Berssenbrugge's work, demarcations between ground and figure are not reinforced but blurred or dislocated. As a result, situating a self or a single seeing "I" within a landscape in Berssenbruge's poems is always a complicated matter. This is not to say that Berssenbrugge's poetry refuses a realm that exists outside a subjective one but, rather, to say that she can't find a point or a line at which to cleanly separate the objective from the subjective, the outside from the inside. As Simpson writes, "perception for B is not only both inner and outer-directed, but also…the inner and outer realms conflate and converge." (137).

For example, Berssenbrugge's "Star Field" presents an "outside" field, a representation of that field, and a subjective reaction to that representation but these distinctions quickly collapse. The poem first presents the visual phenomena of a starry night through a graphic visual representation: "Outside is the field she is thinking about: a category of gray dots/ on a television screen of star data, representing no one's experience" Although initially one might think with the appositive, "representing no one's experience," that the poem is arguing that these gray dots represent something outside human experience, the poem in continuing to ponder this subject refuses to conclude on this note and finds the vital force not in an outside "real" thing or form but within the potential relationship mediated by representation and experience:

> Outside is the field she is thinking about: a category of gray dots on a television screen of star data, representing no one's experience, but which thrills all who gaze on it, so it must be experience. And the land at large becomes the light on the land. (*Empathy* 27)

In "Star Field," ultimately a landscape and its representation cannot be detached from the subjective and selective attention and emotion which it creates and by which it is created: "The land at large becomes the light on the land." The poem refuses the separation between a seeing subject and seen object much in the way Merleau-Ponty refuses such a distinction in his essay, "the Intertwining, the Chiasm." Merleau-Ponty insists that there is no seer who can be defined separately from what is seen nor can "the seen" stand independent of its seer.

> What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing 'all naked' because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh (131).

Signification here does not have an independent referent since objects and subjects are bound together in a body that is neither interior nor exterior. Rather than positioning vision within a construct of beholder and viewed object, then, Berssenbrugge positions it within the "between," within the conditional and contingent.

In her book-length poem, Concordance, Berssenbrugge attempts to realize, specifically, the connection *between* author and reader by accentuating "space" in both its text and illustrations. Concordance, like Endocrinology, is a collaborative work between

Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and artist Kiki Smith. The poem entwines natural imagery with the writing. The images of the book are light and full of space, like an assemblage of feathers or leaves which could easily be disassembled and reassembled by a light wind. Ink blots and dots float between the images and text and space like dandelion seeds or stars and sometimes obscure parts of words. As a result space seems to signify potential rather than emptiness, and the poem attempts to capture this potential rather than the absence or presence of a representation. The poem Concordance seems to employ what Michael Edgerton identifies in a review of Berssenbrugge's as the "poetics of the interval:" "space – between subjects, bodies, inside and outside, perception and the elusive real – is here pregnant with invisibilities, desire, possibility, and the tension between communal and individual forces" (Edgerton 1). In fact, desire and possibility are the forces which inaugurate the poem's first stanza:

> Writing encounters one who
> does not write and I don't try
> for him, but face-to-face draw you
> onto a line or flight like a
> break that may be extended,
> the way milkweed filling space
> above the field is 'like' reading.

Although the poem appeals to vision and the visual, it refuses the presence of a masculine observer. There is no "whacher" and there is no "observed." Instead, there is an attempt to engage "you" in an encounter, but the text shows this as necessarily a conjectural and imperfect design. Just as the "like" in quotes blurs the simile between "field" and "reading," an ink splotch (or a milkweed seed) on the second "face" in "face-to-face" denies any achievable or actual symmetry conveyed by a "face-to-face" encounter. What

emerges from the poem is not a subject addressing an other, not a "face-to-face," but a conjectural space in which this encounter might take place:

> Then it's possible to undo
> Misunderstanding from inside
> by tracing the flight or thread of
> empty space running through
> things…

However, while this encounter may take place within a conjectural space, the intimacy of that encounter is still tangible within the poem as a desire to touch and connect:

> I write to you and you feel me.
>
> What would it be like if you
> contemplated my words and I felt
> you?

In fact, on one page, the fragment of a curled hand in the corner which not only makes the images appear more tactile but also indicates the presence of a "human" in this lyrical space even if that human's face is unseen and unseeable within it.

Thus although an "I" and "eye" are ascribed to an authorial presence in Concordance, the formation of this "eye/I" undermines the conventions of a script for vision which would automatically engender subject and object because it is an "eye/I" which can't exist outside the *process* of formation. Subjectivity is not grounded or fixed within appearance because it always appearing and disappearing

> Seeds disperse in summer air
> ….
> Relation is in the middle, relay,
> Flower description *to* flower
> Becoming of the eye between light
> And heart.

The poem continually gestures at the potential for meaning rather than the presence of it. A concordance in Berssenbrugge's work thereby becomes not a recorded index but a continually shifting index.

Berssenbrugge's work asks us to embrace the between and "becoming" of intersubjective space rather than allow our anxieties to cordon it off and contain it: "Relation is in the middle, relay, flower description *to* flower." Berssenbrugge's work engages Kristeva's notion of "the semiotic chora… the place where subject is both generated and negated, and an area where the codes of subjectivity can be rewritten:

> In imitating the constitution of the symbolic as meaning, poetic mimesis is led to dissolve not only the denotative function but also the specifically theitic function of positing the subject…poetic language puts the subject in process/on trial through a network of marks and semiotic facilitations." (57-58)

The boundaries of both subjectivity and vision, in Berssenbrugge's poetics are not just contingent upon each other but constitutively interdependent. Individuality is subject to a visual relativism that takes place along a continuum and is not contained with an already established spatial construct of what constitutes a body or a being. The site of feminine subjectivity, as a result, is not located within a corporeal representation but within the corporeality of seeing, itself.

Conclusion:

> …one may know what has been put into the pot, and recognize the objects in the stew, but the juice in which they are sustained must be regarded with a peculiar respect because they are all in there too, somehow, and one does not know how they are combined or held in suspension. One must feel the respect due to a profound lack of understanding for the notion of a potential, and for the poet's sense of the nature of a language (6).
>
> William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity

Many women poets since Sylvia Plath have tackled the problem of feminine subjectivity, of what it means to see and be seen as a woman and of how this qualifies or invalidates what can be heard, but what I find particularly interesting about the work of such poets as Anne Carson and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge is how it addresses this problem as less of a matter of how we see "women," but rather of how we see (that is conceive and understand) sight. The type of seeing which posits a subject/beholder who objectifies, reduces, or contains the world around him with idealistic representations is, as many psychoanalytic theorists show, a matter of sexual politics. To challenge these conceptions of femininity, then, becomes a matter of engaging the way we see. Plath's poems show the self-destructive consequences of conceiving a feminine self through this kind of sight which is perhaps why poets like Berssenbrugge and Carson feel the need not to repeat, but to revise and reinvent the script.

When I tell people that I am writing about three women poets, Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, most of them recognize the first name but not the last two. Recognition of the name, "Sylvia Plath," however, usually does not involve recognition of the *poet*, "Sylvia Plath." If I ask which poem they might remember from Sylvia Plath's body of work, most people cannot recall one or else admit to having never read one but they usually can demonstrate knowledge by asking, "Isn't she the crazy one

-- the one who killed herself by sticking her head in an oven?" Although I find it upsetting that my thesis topic is thereby relegated to the realm of the unknown or the insane, I can't help but think this is unfortunately apropos. Does this not echo the context in which most women poets write? Does this not inform one of the essential problems of feminine lyric subjectivity, the problem which is engaged by all three of these poets: Plath, Berssenbrugge, and Carson? I believe that reading how their poems approach this problem of how to construct a lyric subjectivity which voices experiences and emotions that dwell in that unknown or insane realm of the "feminine" is essential to understanding their work. Moreover, I would argue that implicit within this problem is a problem with how we see. Harold Bloom claims that Plath's poems fall short of literary greatness because they are more about sincerity than about trope, but my reading of Plath work renders this claim quite ironic: the moments which I would identify as sincere in Plath's work are those moments where she shows how she must compromise "sincerity" to violence and sensationalism to form a poem and a self which will be recognized and *seen*, for in Plath's poetry being recognized or seen is a precondition of being *heard*. However, much popular and critical reception of Plath's work has led it to fall victim to the very quandary it could illuminate. It is "seen" (i.e., recognized) but whatever particular messages her poems may convey are rarely registered – they are not "heard." In other words, when Plath's representations of feminine subjectivity are interpreted as specific to one human being rather than applicable to many, the resonance her poetry has with modern day manifestations of feminine identity crises -- for example, anorexia, obsessions with plastic surgery, cutting -- is ignored. This is why it is more important to examine hyperbolization and the irony of exhibitionism as a poetic gesture on Plath's part

and not, necessarily, a characteristic of the poet, herself. By focusing on how the style and performative aspects of Plath's poetry construct a *concept* of selfhood and of a feminine lyric subject (rather than a particular or actual self) Plath's work issues a commentary on the violent and fragmented consequences of *appearing* as a female "subject."

Anne Carson's work invokes a subjectivity which cannot be seen or represented, a subjectivity which resists the de-humanization of Plath's theatrical self-presentation. The lyric subject in Carson's poems deliberately moves "out of the light" into the margins where meaning cannot be seen but must be read – between fragments, between stories, between translations, between the photographic evidence and documentation. Carson's work calls attention to what she deems as a masculine habit of "marking" -- linguistic conventions which categorize and spatialize people, time, and things in a way that binds genders and identities to inflexible visual constructs. Her work identifies the rigidity of these boundaries as a crucial link to the crises of feminine subjectivity and feminine authorship. Although her work investigates visual media (television, paintings, film, etc.), her work usually does so to point out where the pursuit of the visual representation actually obscures or destroys what it seeks to illuminate. Her poetry often refuses to provide clear images and instead plays with the process of "imagining," rupturing any easy continuity between language and mental imagery. Carson's work asks its reader to rely on other senses and as well as other forms of cognitive processing to re-think an Enlightenment script for seeing which yields a false notion of perspectival objectivity. Rather than invoke "seeing" her work tends to foreground and challenge the medium where seeing takes place.

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's work also challenges a "script for seeing" that objectifies feminine identities but does so in a completely different manner than Carson's. While Carson's poetry re-writes a script for seeing by denying, delaying, and/or confounding the conduit between language and mental imagery, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's work seems to do the opposite, overloading the reader with visual terms and picturing possibilities, exploring different angles, shapes, light patterns, shadows, and types of architecture. Her exploration of the visual, moreover, addresses the temporal, subjective, and contextual permutations of perception. As a result, in Berssenbrugge's "seeing" there is no clean separation between outside and inside nor between seer and the seen, and rather than positioning a subject, her work creates a subject who is always positioning and re-positioning in time and space, a subject who is always "becoming" in a desire to connect with others. In Berssenbrugge's poetics of vision, the ability to engage others in a meaningful fashion involves seeking out a "different level of representation" where seeing addresses what "seeing" cannot reach or where "seeing" cannot remain fixed, asking us to embrace something which "you can't see with your eye. So you have to start letting go." Realizing how Sylvia Plath's poetry elucidates the traps of feminine representation, sheds light on the significance of both Anne Carson's and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's work. In their poetic figurations of vision and subjectivity, both Anne Carson and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge open up new possibilities for writing and conceptualizing a feminine lyric voice.

Bibliography:

ABBREVIATIONS:

AR: Carson, Anne. Autobiography of Red.
GIG: Carson, Anne. Glass, Irony, and God.
MOH: Carson, Anne. Men in the Off-Hours.
CP: Plath, Sylvia. Collected Poems

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