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'I CARPENTER A SPACE FOR THE THING I AM GIVEN':

Influence and the Consciousness of Space in Emily Dickinson, H.D., and Sylvia Plath

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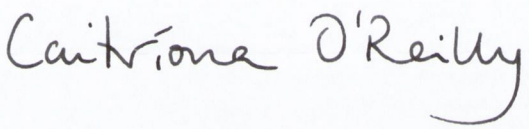

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SUMMARY

The introduction indicates the context from which my examination of the continuities between Emily Dickinson, H.D., and Sylvia Plath arose; it does so by stating the principal areas of difference between this thesis and previous studies of influence in American poetry. It highlights the significance of consciousness in the work of all three writers, linking this, with reference to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957), to the prevalence and consistency of spatial imagery in their poetry and prose. My introduction proposes a more flexible phenomenological, rather than a strict psychoanalytical approach to the study of influence in the writers I am examining.

In the first chapter I state the terms of my confrontation with previous studies of influence, detailing the way in which a phenomenological approach to the three writers under consideration allows a greater illumination of their lines of continuity, as well as their significant departures from each other. In this chapter I engage with Harold Bloom's theories of literary influence, scrutinising the strongly Freudian basis of his criticism. I then move to an examination of the subsequent influence-theories of Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar (the 'Female Affiliation Complex'), and Joanne Feit Diehl's Kleinian method, as demonstrated in her analysis of the Marianne Moore-Elizabeth Bishop relationship. This chapter concludes by engaging with Gaston Bachelard's essay on his phenomenological approach to poetic imagery in *The Poetics of Space*, and states the usefulness of this as an alternative critical method.

My second chapter begins by establishing a literary-historical context for Dickinson's writing by means of an analysis of the reception given her poetry following its publication in the decade immediately following her death. I then briefly examine Harold Bloom's essay on Dickinson in *The Western Canon*, forging a link between his influence-theories and the New Critical denial of authorial intentionality, which I regard as fundamental to a consideration of consciousness in the literary text. My chapter then provides a detailed analysis of the function of consciousness in Dickinson's poetry, highlighting the intimate connections between it and Dickinson's varied use of the concept of space in her work. By doing this I demonstrate how Dickinson's poetry conveys the important idea of a concealed interiority as a form of resistance, and suggest

a rudimentary link between this and her repeated refusal to publish. This interiority, I argue, takes the form of a space of infinite and exhilarating possibility, an uncharted territory whose precise coordinates are hinted at but never revealed. This allows me to emphasize what I regard as a strong utopian element in Dickinson's work, a feature I find repeated in the poetry of H.D., which I examine in chapter three.

I propose a continuity between the modernist consciousness I find in Dickinson and that of H.D., partly resulting from chronology (H.D. was born in 1886, the year of Dickinson's death), partly from their shared particular emphasis on the space and content of consciousness. I establish a context for H.D.'s poetry by examining her links with Imagism and her experience of both world wars. My analysis of her work proceeds from an engagement with her first volume *Sea Garden*, which I read through the lens of her later *roman à clef Bid Me To Live*, to an analysis of her late epic *Helen in Egypt*. I highlight the significant continuities between Dickinson's spatial metaphors and H.D.'s, which I see as a kind of gestatory space, a refuge from the devastation of the war as well as a wellspring of utopian visions.

My fourth chapter argues for an interpretation of Sylvia Plath's writing as a terminal point for this kind of female modernist consciousness, and shows how obsolescence becomes a distinct feature of her spatial awareness. I suggest that this is due in large part to Plath's particular historical situation, the 'social space' of the late 1950s and early 1960s which provides the backdrop for her work. I contextualise Plath by comparing her novel *The Bell Jar* with H.D.'s *Her* (*HERmione*) highlighting the many startling similarities between the two texts, and then move to an analysis of the critical context of her work, which I regard almost as a reiteration of the Dickinson mythography. The chapter ends with a detailed examination of the prevalent spatial images of her poetry, which are figured as, at best, temporary refuges for a consciousness menaced by hostile outside forces and at worst, as the isolated and airless 'bell jar' of psychic derangement. The thesis then concludes by suggesting how the model of reading which has been delineated may have a considerably wider application.

Introduction

This thesis began as an examination of Emily Dickinson's influence on subsequent generations of American women writers. During the course of my initial exploration of this idea two facts became unavoidable: firstly, that Dickinson's influence on American writers of both sexes and on writers of other nationalities continues to be vast, subtle, and in many ways untraceable, and secondly, that the idea of literary 'influence' was itself in need of definite clarification. Inevitably I was drawn to the most ambitious and comprehensive theory of literary influence available, Harold Bloom's concept of influence-anxiety. However, I realised during the course of my engagement with Bloom that 'influence' is so slippery a term that it necessitates a considerable theoretical scaffolding to sustain it. My objections to the Bloom influence theory proliferated, centering mainly (although not solely) around his unreconstructed Freudianism, his dehistoricising tendencies, and his conservative drive towards a canonicity which masquerades as literary-historical inevitability. As I explored some of the alternative, feminist influence models (those of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Joanne Feit Diehl) it became obvious that a theory of influence which did not rely merely on name-checking source-study would have to depend very heavily on psychoanalytic models, since the 'family romance' paradigm seems to be the only viable and sufficiently complex alternative to such an approach. As I engaged more deeply with Dickinson and with H.D. and Sylvia Plath, the two writers in whom, in my view, her legacy is most strikingly apparent, I realised the essential contradiction at the heart of the influence project. To attempt to explain the fact of a text, or a poetic 'identity,' by means of a psychoanalytically-inflected theory of influence represents an attempt to undo that identity, to explain it much as one might try to explain the personality of an individual simply by analysing the personalities of his parents and grandparents, and with about as much chance of success. I found the reductionism of this approach unappealing, since the significant temperamental, historical, and aesthetic *differences* between the three writers were almost of equal interest to me. I began to consider more carefully the possibilities of a method which would enable me

to examine the self-constituting strategies of these writers without inevitably (and unfairly) reducing them in the process. In other words, my task clarified itself as the attempt to trace lines of continuity between Dickinson, H.D. and Plath without collapsing the achieved voices of the later writers back into that of their precursor, and without characterising Dickinson solely as a permissive or prohibitive mother-figure.

In my view, the most salient shared feature of each of these writers was, and remains, the *consciousness* which animates their poetry and prose. Following a much-trodden critical way in Dickinson and H.D. studies, and a road less travelled in Plath studies, I interpret this consciousness as an exemplary modernist phenomenon, incorporating both a unique self-awareness and an awareness of the self-in-the-world. This consciousness is of course profoundly affected by a recognition of gender and of historical situation—in examining these three writers as modernists, I also urgently needed to find a corrective to the dehistoricising bias of psychoanalytical influence theories.

I was greatly helped in my quest by reading Gaston Bachelard's classic 1957 work *La Poetique de l'Espace* (*The Poetics of Space*). *The Poetics of Space* is not a study of literary influence in any conventional sense, although the poetic phenomenology Bachelard argues for involves a recognition of the formative influence of key environmental and spatial features on a writer's consciousness. Bachelard notes the prevalence of spatial metaphors inside a plethora of different texts, and proposes the experience of habitation as one of the most profound markers of human consciousness. As John R. Stilgoe states in his foreword to the 1994 Beacon Press edition of the text:

> "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box," he determines early on. As he listens to the geometry of echoes dignifying—and distinguishing—every old house, every experienced house, he probes the impact of human habitation on geometrical form, and the impact of the form upon human inhabitants... Bachelard reveals time after time that setting is more than scene in works of art, that it is often the armature around which the work revolves.[1]

[1] *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. vii, x.

In common with a number of critics (see especially Suzanne Juhasz's 1983 study *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind*) I had been repeatedly struck by the prevalence of spatial metaphors in the poetry of Dickinson, H.D., and Plath. Bachelard's theory allowed me to regard such repetitions as more than a fortunate coincidence. The further I explored this idea, the clearer it became that space in its various manifestations is intimately connected with consciousness in the work of all three writers. However, where a critic like Juhasz tends to literalise Dickinson's spatial metaphors, seeing them as descriptive of 'the mind' as a space of (albeit empowering) retreat, an alternative to more conventional nineteenth-century feminine destinies, my interest was in consciousness as visibly 'emergent' in and through the space of the text. Moreover, I identified a certain thematic continuity as I read through H.D. and Plath. I had noted this before reading *The Poetics of Space*, but the ideas I encountered there enabled me to clarify my observations, as well as allowing me to see that a phenomenology of poetic space could provide a valuable alternative to models of influence which seek to reduce the poetic image to its (supposed) genetic components. I was helped by Bachelard's own objections to psychoanalysis as an approach to poetry, on the grounds that psychoanalysis cannot adequately explain the uniqueness of the individual image:

> When I receive a new poetic image, I experience its quality of inter-subjectivity. I know that I am going to repeat it in order to communicate my enthusiasm. When considered in transmission from one soul to another, it becomes evident that a poetic image eludes causality. Doctrines that are timidly causal, such as psychology, or strongly causal, such as psychoanalysis, can hardly determine the ontology of what is poetic. For nothing prepares a poetic image, especially not culture, in the literary sense, and especially not perception, in the psychological sense[2]

Bachelard's theories permit us to regard literary influence as a route of transmission, without reducing one term in the inter-subjective equation to the other. It allows us to regard each text (and each image) as original in itself, recognizing that its causal factors can be legitimately speculated about, but cannot finally explain the *fact*

[2] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxiv

of the text or its effects. Moreover, I discovered that Bachelard's theories about 'the dialectics of inside and outside' (the subtle interconnected pressures between text and environment), provided me with a useful way of contextualising the writings I was interested in. I have therefore avoided the unfairly dehistoricising method of psychoanalysis by juxtaposing examinations of the literary-historical environment of the texts with delineations of what I call the 'interiority' of those texts. Although I suggest points of connection between text and context, nowhere do I regard the writings as caused by, or reducible to their respective historical situations. Indeed, as the thesis progressed it became clear that another fundamental link between these instances of modernist consciousness was the concept of *resistance* to exterior forces which were intuited as destructive. Thus, in the work of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath the space of the text becomes a site of self-construction while also retaining (to a greater or lesser extent) a consciousness of *exterior* space.

Instead of regarding Bachelard's theories as a complete and irrefutable system of interpretative tools (as psychoanalysis is often regarded), I have used his ideas as the starting, rather than the end-point for my explorations of the interconnections between Dickinson, H.D. and Plath. In doing so I have borne in mind his cautionary words, which might almost have been conceived as a reproach to critics of the Bloomian school:

> The real phenomenologist must make it a point to be systematically modest. This being the case, it seems to me that merely to refer to phenomenological reading powers, which make of the reader a poet on a level with the image he has read, shows already a taint of pride. Indeed, it would be a lack of modesty on my part to assume personally a reading power that could match and re-live the power of organized, complete creation implied by a poem in its entirety. But there is even less hope of attaining to a synthetic phenomenology which would dominate an entire oeuvre, as certain psychoanalysts believe they can do. It is therefore on the level of detached images that I shall succeed in "reverberating" phenomenologically.[3]

It is just such a 'synthetic' approach I have attempted to avoid during the writing of this thesis, which is why chapter one 'works through' the major

[3] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxv

psychoanalytic studies in order to demonstrate the dangers of approaching a text with an established set of critical preconceptions. The consistencies I identify in the works of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath are not the outcome of my critical method, but are present on the level of imagery in their prose and poetry. Paul De Man writes: 'the hermeneutic understanding is always, by its very nature, lagging behind.'[4] This is a key insight which Bloom, despite his constant emphasis on the *belatedness* of the poetic text, ignores. Preferring to approach poetry with an arsenal of critical categories which he calls 'revisionary ratios' he tends to reject any writer who cannot conform to this blueprint.

[4] Paul De Man, 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 32.

Chapter One

'Why Do Men Write Poems?' Harold Bloom's Freudian Anxieties

In this study of three major Modernist writers who are also women, I will be scrutinising notions of poetic influence, identity, and consciousness, suggesting that these concepts are connected in subtle but inescapable ways. In this first chapter I examine the theoretical foundations for a theory of influence as it appears in the work of several leading critics. Of major relevance here is Harold Bloom, who, in his attempts to explain the fact of powerful literary identity, has claimed influence as the single most important factor in the construction and continuation of the Western literary canon. Following a detailed examination of Bloom's theories—in which I emphasise their profound indebtedness to and even 'influence-anxiety' towards Freudian ideas about subjectivity and psychological development—I then examine some feminist critics' responses to Bloom. In each of these instances I highlight the overwhelming reliance of these critics on psychoanalytic theory to explain the fact of a strong poetic identity. This chapter highlights the problems and limitations of such an approach, claiming that it is inevitably reductive in emphasis, tending at best to regard the poem as a successful sublimation/compensation or, at worst, regarding the text as a mere symptom. I highlight a fundamental conflict between psychoanalysis and literary criticism, and throughout my thesis will demonstrate how this conflict revolves around the idea of *consciousness* in poetry. This chapter suggests an alternative to these dominant methods, a notion of conscious 'emergence' through poetic language which is inspired by the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard, in his 1957 study *The Poetics of Space*, provides an alternative model of poetic genesis which successfully avoids the pitfalls of psychoanalytic reductionism. My chapter concludes with a summary of this method and an analysis of its crucial usefulness for a study of the emergence of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath.

Any study of the notion of poetic identity or originality must confront the Bloom oeuvre, which is the most comprehensive and thorough examination of poetic self-fashioning available. My analysis of Bloom's work focuses largely upon his pervasive Freudianism. Since it is my contention in this thesis that psychoanalytic

theories of literary influence and identity-formation are in most instances unfair to the writers to which they are applied (particularly if they are women), I begin by speculating on the uses Bloom makes of Freud in two of his works; *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* and *The Anxiety of Influence*. In the following examination of Bloom's work I demonstrate the underlying anxieties which affect Bloom's conclusions and analyse his claim in *An Elegy for the Canon* that 'the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value'[1] In chapter 4 of *Agon*, 'Freud and the Sublime; a Catastrophe Theory of Creativity,' Bloom's often uneasy engagement with Freud's work is at its most explicit. In this and the following chapter, Bloom attempts a genuine 'usurpation' or strong reading of the Freudian texts to which he is indebted. Following Lacan, he is at pains to assert the rhetorical origin of Freud's theoretical *oeuvre*, in what proves to be an attempt to obliterate the conflicting claims of the disciplines of psychoanalysis and literary criticism.

Bloom is well aware that the critic and the psychoanalyst have for long been reluctant bedfellows. Lionel Trilling's 1940 essay *Freud and Literature* is quoted for its recognition of the Freudian psychology 'as being truly *parallel* to the workings of poetry.'[2] [italics mine] As I will show, the exact nature of the relationship between psychoanalytic and literary texts is of crucial importance for any examination of Bloom's psychology of creativity, since it is precisely here that the important differences between both of these disciplines come most sharply into focus. An effective reading of Bloom's theories can usefully locate itself along this fault-line, and a rhetorical analysis of Bloom should reveal this to be a telling preoccupation in his own work. In agreement with Trilling, Bloom chooses to avoid falling in with what he views as Freud's inadequate speculations on the psychogenesis of creativity. The authority of the critic *depends* upon his ability to claim for the creative process (and by association his own critical activity) the status of a primary act, rooted somehow at the origin of the psyche's workings. We are reminded 'that psychoanalysis is a science of tropes is now an accepted commonplace in France.'[3] Following psychoanalysis, Bloom asserts that the trope is a crucial link between the literary text and the psyche's

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[1] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p. 23
[2] Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 92
[3] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* p. 93

processes. Bloom notes that the American psychoanalysts Roy Schafer and Marshall Edelson have described psychic defences as fantasies rather than mechanisms, which allows him to propose an intimate link between the concepts of defence and figuration, since 'fantasies are always tropes, in which so-called 'deep structures', like desires, become transformed in to 'surface structures', like symptoms.'[4] There is nothing particularly heretical in this speculation, since the semantic component of the symptom has long been an established fact in psychoanalysis. Bloom proceeds with the assertion that 'A psychoanalyst interpreting a symptom, dream or verbal slip and a literary critic interpreting a poem thus share the burden of having to become conceptual rhetoricians.'[5] However, the recognition of a 'common burden' does little to screen the essential differences between the interpretation of a symptom and the interpretation of a poem, as Bloom is well aware:

> since we can all agree that the interpretation of schizophrenia is a rather more desperately urgent matter than the interpretation of poetry, I am in no way inclined to sneer at psychoanalysts for their instinctive privileging of their own kinds of interpretation.[6]

Freud, it is maintained, 'is therefore as much the concern of literary criticism as he is of psychoanalysis. His intention was to found a science; instead he left as legacy a literary canon and a discipline of healing.' It should prove useful to examine the critical necessity which determines this view of Freud as primarily a strong writer and to assess the ultimate legitimacy or seriousness of Bloom's claims to an understanding of the influence process at work in the Western literary tradition on the basis of such a view. As we shall see, a rejection of Freud's scientism will later prove useful for the purposes of Bloom's argument. It is significant that all claims to a scientific, referential truth-value in the theoretical writings of psychoanalysts are thrown into doubt. The unwavering focus is upon analysis-as-rhetoric, as Bloom argues; 'like the shaman, the psychoanalyst cannot heal unless he himself is persuaded by his own rhetoric.'[7] He continues with a distinction between the practising and the writing psychoanalyst in

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[4] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 93
[5] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 93
[6] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionsism*, p.93
[7] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* p.94

what is essentially an act of critical appropriation and the move by which he justifies the rest of his argument. This depends upon an acceptance that the psychoanalyst

> as a writer is neither more nor less privileged than any other writer. He cannot invoke the trope of the unconscious as though he were doing more (or less) than the poet or critic does by invoking the trope of the Imagination, or than the theologian does by invoking the trope of the Divine.[8]

The quotation illustrates Bloom's technique of drawing analogies between separate disciplines and then collapsing the analogies into a comprehensive theory of the imagination. I shall later show how this is a primary indication of Bloom's own undeclared influence anxiety. Bloom's stance is in many ways a reaction against the simplistic psychoanalytic interpretations of poetry as mere symptoms of an abnormality or art-as-therapy. This is clearly indicative of tensions between the 'discipline of healing' that is psychoanalysis and the higher reaches of literary criticism, as well as his own anxieties about indebtedness to the authority of Freud. In an attempt to 'quarry Freud for theories of creativity' which do not regard art as a secondary indicator of sickness or health, Bloom proceeds to an examination of Freud's writing 'where he himself is most imaginative',[9] principally in the later essays *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *Negation* (1925), *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), and *Analysis Terminable and Interminable (*1937). Having stated his intention to subsume Freud's later speculations into the realm of rhetoric, Bloom then posits an equivalence between *das Unheimlich* or the Freudian Uncanny and one of the central concepts of his own theory of literature, the Sublime. In this way Bloom usefully characterises the truly creative or Sublime 'moment' as originally negative; that is, it has its origins in defence. By so doing, Bloom suggests that Freud unwittingly did criticism a favour, by 'demythologizing our pieties about artistic creation,'[10] and proposes that our most high-minded artistic aspirations must inevitably be contaminated by the later Freud's view of the destructive quality of the human instincts. Bloom maintains that this original defensive reflex is inexorably linked to a precursor's prior action of defence, which in turn has its beginnings in the negative moment of an earlier figure, and so on ad

[8] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p.94
[9] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p.96
[10] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p.98

infinitum. This interpretation is in part indebted to Freud's examination of the function of repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud observed no necessary connection between the human compulsion to repeat and the Pleasure Principle, noting instead that 'no lesson has been learnt from the old experience of these activities having led instead only to unpleasure.'[11] Similarly, not all dream-work can be seen as wish-fulfilment. Instead, Freud saw the function of some dreams as attempting to 'master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis.' Anxiety arises from the organism's endeavour to pre-empt shock, to remain always in a state of preparedness. Such reactions appeared to operate independently of the Pleasure Principle and led Freud to speculate upon the existence of an instinct

> inherent in organic life to restore to an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, an expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.[12]

Instincts which give the appearance of striving towards an unknown goal are deceptive, since organic life is innately conservative, oriented in various ways towards *preservation*. Freud saw such instincts as 'seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new,'[13] leading, ultimately, to the conclusion that 'the aim of all life is death' and, looking backwards, that 'inanimate things existed before living ones.'[14] In one of the most suggestive passages in this work, those forces which oppose the demands of the pleasure principle are interpreted as 'daemonic' in character. What is perhaps Bloom's clearest definition of the concept of the Sublime appears on p. 101 of *Agon,* where it is asserted that Freud's 1919 essay the Uncanny is ' the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime.'[15] Bloom continues:

> It may seem curious to regard Freud as the culmination of a literary and

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[11] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p.98
[12] Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond The Pleasure Principle', in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 11, p.293
[13] Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' pp. 310, 311
[14] Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' p. 311
[15] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 101

> philosophical tradition that held no particular interest for him, but I would correct my own statement by the modification, no conscious interest for him. The Sublime, as I read Freud, is one of his major repressed concerns, and this literary repression on his part is a clue to what I take to be a gap in his theory of repression.[16]

Throughout this essay, Bloom is at pains to reiterate what he sees as Freud's debt to the literary tradition, as when he comments upon Goethe and Schelling's use of the term *das Unbewusste* during the late eighteenth century. Bloom acknowledges Freud's own recognition that 'the poets had been there before him,'[17] claiming that Freud's innovation had been the attempt to use scientifically a term ('the Unconscious') which originally had strong literary or rhetorical connotations. The claim is that Freud failed to acknowledge his 'intense narrowing down of the traditional concept, for he separated out and away from it the attributes of creativity that poets and other speculators always had ascribed to it.'[18] What I would suggest is the visible limit of Bloom's own interpretation here discloses itself. He hints rather than asserts that this originary 'debt' is a fact which has some bearing on the *substance* of Freud's explorations of the concept of the unconscious in the human subject. Some repression of the term's origins may be possible to infer, but it does not follow that this is an indicator of (for Bloom) a life-or-death struggle for a 'strong reading'. But Bloom holds the view that if any motivation or necessity can be ascribed to Freud's subsequent discoveries on the same subject, it is only that of a search for priority or originality, similar to that of the Bloomian 'poet-as-poet.' Clearly, and in what would no doubt be defended by the critic as an inevitable 'misprision', Bloom here colours Freud with his own critical concerns. Perhaps the argument would possess cogency if the Freudian texts were submitted to an exclusively rhetorical interpretation, but as before, the legitimacy of such an approach, if only for the purposes of literary criticism, must inevitably be questioned. Bloom, in his necessity to see Freud as strong poet and true exponent of the sublime, leaves all extra-literary considerations out of account. This parallels his tendency to do the same with most poetic texts he analyses also. In my view, no interpretation should be accepted without some small acknowledgement of the

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[16] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 101
[17] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 99
[18] Bloom: *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p. 99

basic non-identity of certain texts. A psychoanalytic case study is simply not the same as a poem or a piece of criticism.

There are strong reasons for suggesting that Bloom is here eroding the claimed humanist basis for many of his notions about literary production. Despite assertions that 'the interpretation of schizophrenia is a rather more desperately urgent matter than the interpretation of poetry,' Bloom seems quite prepared to ignore Freud's debt to his scientific background and his years of clinical observation, and to deny that this may have had any influence on his texts. Moreover, in his need to assert the priority of the creative or literary drive alongside, if not over, the life and death drives, Bloom must tread a fine line between the acceptance of Freud as genuine de-mythologiser of the motivations of the human subject (upon which his interpretation depends), and as yet another strong poet merely denying his own life-threatening indebtedness to his literary and philosophical precursors. Thus Bloom's argument about the exclusively instinctive nature of creativity and influence can be shown to rest on shaky ground. Bloom denies Freud's non-literary influences in order to claim him as a strong poet subject to influence anxiety. He then uses the Freudian authority (which he has just discounted as such) to support his own theories. The paradoxical nature of this project is clear. Whether or not Freud was a scientist in the commonly accepted sense is outside the bounds of this argument, but Bloom's nonchalant effacement of the distance between literary criticism and psychoanalysis hints at an influence anxiety which he has repressed. The uneasy preoccupation with science, and the usurpation of certain elements of Freudian analysis in order to claim truth-status for his own comments about creative psychology proves Bloom to be in thrall to a brand of criticism which thrives on just such a critical technique. As Iris Murdoch has commented: 'Structuralism is deeply motivated by an appreciation of languages of science and technology, which seem to undermine our ordinary language and its 'naive' truth values.'[19] The following comment which Murdoch makes earlier in the same essay is particularly pertinent to my examination of Bloom's use of Freudian theory: 'an aspect of structuralism is to regard history as 'fabulation', and 'the past' as a meaning-construct belonging to the present.'[20] In his resolute ahistoricism (his denial of the impact of social history on the

[19] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992) p. 200.
[20] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p.198

literary text) Bloom shows himself to be influenced by this structuralist version of literary history in his interpretative technique. In my chapter on Dickinson I examine this tendency as it appears in its New Critical guise and speculate about Bloom's specific relationship to it. Here however, Bloom's engagement with Freud skirts the boundary between analogy and identification, with the desired, truly strong reading relying upon the latter. But such a reading can be achieved only at the cost of effacing (or ignoring) the essential differences between the types of texts scrutinised. Bloom submits Freud's 1919 essay *The Uncanny* to a rhetorical analysis in an attempt to establish the 'daemonic' character of Freud's own findings. The connection between notions of the poetic sublime and what Bloom terms 'catastrophe-creation' is elucidated. Bloom translates uncanniness into the high Romantic faith in the power of the creative mind to overcome the forces of time and death, writing,

> I come, now, belatedly, to the definition of 'the Sublime', before considering Freud as the last great theorist of that mode. As a literary idea, the Sublime originally meant a style of great 'loftiness', that is of verbal power, of greatness or strength conceived agonistically, which is to say against all possible competition.[21]

Bloom writes of 'the definition' of the Sublime as though there were nothing of originality in the definition he is about to expound upon. A paragraph later, he castigates Freud for his 'curiously weak defensive attempt to separate his subject from the aesthetics of the sublime, which he insists 'deals only with feelings of a positive nature'', and affirms the 'long philosophical tradition of the negative sublime.' Bloom locates Freud's repression of his philosophical and literary precursors here, but fails to acknowledge Freud's qualification of his denial: 'but I must confess that I have not made a very thorough examination of the literature, especially the foreign literature, relating to this present modest contribution of mine, for reasons which, as may easily be guessed, lie in the times in which we live...'[22] That anything resembling a protestation of modesty could be genuinely attributed to Freud evidently strikes Bloom as incomprehensible. Predictably, he also ignores Freud's gesture towards his own historical moment. The hermeneutics of suspicion characterised by Bloom's brand of criticism permits the critic to shun the possibility of any writer saying what he means,

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[21] Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p.101

and clearly it is his intention to apply this principle also to the founder of psychoanalysis. Apart from denying Bloom's own enormous indebtedness, it is one way of ensuring that nobody gets their due, except the diabolically clever strong reader. If all claims to priority or truth are discarded, the critic's protestations become inevitably self-fulfilling, and the value of a text which claims to be no more than successful on its own narrow terms, while aggressively denying the possibility of another interpretation, (or an anterior reality) is surely questionable. I have examined Bloom's own engagement with Freud in some detail in order to show how, with its overwhelming emphasis on unconscious forces, Bloom's theories of the Sublime are heavily and inescapably indebted to Freudian notions about the compensatory function of art, even as they attempt (elaborately) to deny that indebtedness. This calls the much-vaunted 'originality' of Bloom's approach into question. In fact Bloom has much more in common with other critics who use the insights of psychoanalysis to decipher poetry than he seems willing to admit. This persistent tendency to substitute the primacy of the 'primary' for the 'secondary' text is nowhere more obvious than in Bloom's original study of poetic identity and the influence process, *The Anxiety of Influence*, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1973. In 160 pages, it constitutes an ambitious and pioneering attempt to produce a systematic theory explaining the dynamics of western literary history, the formation of its canon, and the psychological impulses which provide the motor force behind this process. Bloom states that (as he will later claim in his essays on Freud) his agenda is one of 'de-idealisation', and is intended as an original counterweight to the opposing factions of American formalist criticism on the one hand, and the insidious effects of new-fangled continental theories on the other. He writes: 'One aim of this theory is corrective; to de-idealize our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another. Another aim, also corrective, is to try to provide a poetics that will foster a more adequate practical criticism.'[23] Accepting the fact of poetic influence as obvious, Bloom posits a psychological grounding for his theory which transcends the pedantry of mere source-study, as well as the vulgarity of biographical speculation. Instead, inter-poetic relations are claimed to approach in their inevitability the fundamental psychological necessities delineated by Freud:

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[22] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 14, p.340.
[23] Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence*, (Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1973), p.5.

> Poetic influence, or as I shall more frequently term it, poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet. When such study considers the context in which that life-cycle is enacted, it will be compelled to examine simultaneously the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance, and as chapters in the history of modern revisionism, 'modern' meaning here post-Enlightenment.[24]

Bloom acknowledges his own debt to Freud and Nietzsche, while claiming his theory possesses a greater 'literalism' than Nietzsche and less optimism than Freud: 'Both Nietzsche and Freud underestimated poets and poetry, yet each yielded more power to phantasmagoria than it truly possesses. They too, despite their moral realism, over-idealized the imagination.'[25] The Freudian idea that art is a sublimation of Eros, a signifier of emotional and biological maturation, and thus a supreme moral achievement, is debunked by Bloom as a profound misunderstanding of the nature of poetic ambition. The achievements of truly strong poets are in a real sense lies against what Bloom terms the tyranny of time; they are symptoms representing instincts more crucial than any mere sublimation of sexual drives, 'for every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do.'[26] Poets are therefore psychologically exceptional human beings, with their achievements firmly rooted in a notion of unique and solitary subjectivity. However 'death,' as we have already seen in Bloom's examination of Freud, is a mere metaphor ('literal meaning equals anteriority equals an earlier state of meaning equals an earlier state of things equals death equals literal meaning'), since Bloom is wary of stating a commonplace ('Yet, do thy worst, old Time. Despite thy wrong,/ My love shall in my verse ever live young'[27]). Whereas Freud described great art as a moral and cultural triumph over death and illness in a general sense, Bloom finds it necessary to posit the existence of a wholly separate psychological realm (represented by the emblem of the 'Covering Cherub' in his quasi-mythical system) to explain the genesis of creativity and thus claim for his own theory an irrefutably original status. *The Anxiety of Influence* thus exemplifies a central feature

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[24] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 7-8.
[25] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 8-9.
[26] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.10.
[27] William Shakespeare, Sonnet no. 19, in Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951), p. 1311

of Bloom's work which (as I have already shown) his later, direct engagement with Freud makes even clearer, a willingness to extrapolate directly from Freudian speculation in order to present a 'psychological' theory of creativity in purely rhetorical terms. This strategy inevitably fails because the psychological justification for the theory proves to be arbitrary and unfounded. Bloom is concerned merely with originality *per se*, and for this preoccupation his own immediate New Critical inheritance is in no small part responsible. Since Bloom's aim is not to produce a study of the psychological phenomenon of creativity as such, the taken-for-granted category of 'genius' is never submitted to scrutiny, and his theory evidences a need to re-establish, against Barthes' proclamation of the 'Death of the Author', the authority of an exceptional subjectivity. This reveals a fundamental contradiction in Bloom's work, the co-existence of a stated intention to de-idealise the origins of poetry, and a restitutive impulse which attempts to reinstate the centrality and unshakeable power of a single literary authority. It is a concern which is made explicit in Bloom's later work *The Western Canon.* Here the notion of 'genius' is invoked as the ultimate touchstone of literary worth and the basis of all correct aesthetic judgement. Bloom addresses the 'mystery of Shakespeare's genius,' in a dismissal of New Historicist theories and a thinly-veiled attack on the Greenblatt of *Shakespearean Negotiations* in particular:

> If 'social energies' wrote King Lear and Hamlet, why exactly were social energies more productive in the son of the Stratford artisan than in the burly bricklayer Ben Jonson? The exasperated New Historicist or Feminist critic has a curious affinity with the exasperations that keep creating partisans for the idea of Sir Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford as the true author of Lear.[28]

Bloom disagrees strongly with New Historicist methods and is as scathing about Greenblatt's 'social energies' as he elsewhere is about Feminist criticism. But for Greenblatt, the fact of authorial consciousness is not in doubt. His dispute is primarily with critics who would maintain that the subjectivity of genius is in some way exempt from social or historical influences. His theories maintain that great literary works gain value from the authorial consciousness' sensitivity to these extra-textual influences. These ideas call into doubt the concepts of both a 'total artist' and a 'totalizing society,'

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[28]Harold Bloom: *The Western Canon*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company), 1994, p.60.

and can be read as an counterbalance to Bloom's characterisation of the artist as near-perfect solipsist or the victim of a Borgesian 'infestation' of literature. Greenblatt writes:

> The textual analyses I was trained to do had as their goal the identification and celebration of a numinous literary authority, whether that authority was ultimately located in the mysterious genius of an artist or in the mysterious perfection of a text whose intuitions and concepts can never be expressed in other terms. The great attraction of this authority is that it appears to bind and fix the energies we prize, to identify a stable and permanent source of literary power, to offer an escape from shared contingency. This project, endlessly repeated, repeatedly fails for one reason: there is no escape from contingency.[29]

Greenblatt's intention is to produce a 'poetics of culture', a comprehensive theory tracing the subtle negotiations and trade-offs (mainly political, social and sexual), which mark the boundaries of the text. Its interest lies mainly in its recognition of other, important sources of influence. However, Greenblatt's study is in many ways as extreme as Bloom's in its materialism. While entertaining and provoking in its detailed reconstruction of the cultural context of Shakespearean drama, it scarcely provides an adequate explanation of the poetic impulse *per se*. It rejects too readily any recognition of the psychological factors necessary for literary production, and thus is totalising in its way, while Bloom moves too far in the opposite direction, unconsciously keeping company with the partisans of attribution he satirises by his anxious need to reinforce the Bard of Stratford myth. His preternatural insight into the workings of the Shakespearean and Marlovian minds is continued in the 1997 preface to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*. This sketch of Shakespeare (with whom Bloom almost seems to be on intimate terms) in *The Western Canon* is simultaneously comic and indicative of his own deep anxieties as a critic:

> His friends and acquaintances left testimony of an amiable, rather ordinary-seeming person: open, neighbourly, witty, gentle, free of manner, someone with whom you could have a relaxed drink...In true Borgesian mode, it is as though the creator of scores of major characters and hundreds of frequently vivid minor figures wasted no imaginative energy in inventing a persona for himself. At the very center of the Canon is the least self-conscious and least aggressive of all major writers we

[29] Stephen Greenblatt: *Shakespearean Negotiations*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), p.3.

have known.[30]

Bloom proceeds with the fallacy of reading dramatic characters as though they were more or less transparent ciphers for the Shakespearean personality. This is in contradiction to his earlier recognition of the central mystery of Shakespeare, 'Shakespeare's own tactics of losing his selfhood in his work.'[31] This emphasis reads suspiciously like a (poor) psychoanalytic case-study, and precisely what light it is intended to shed on Shakespeare's writings is unclear. But it goes further than psychoanalysis. Bloom seems compelled repeatedly to return to his notion of Shakespeare's subjectivity in a manner reminiscent of a kind of negative theology. Despite repeated refutations in *The Anxiety of Influence* of what he calls the 'Angelic School' of literary criticism (represented by C.S. Lewis and Northrop Frye), Bloom's emphasis on the centrality of Shakespeare in our lives is arguably a religious one. It is indicative of a queasy morality in Bloom's work which he evidently cannot quite suppress. Shakespeare, we are informed, 'has no metaphysics, no ethics, and rather less political theory than is brought to him by his current critics. His sonnets show that he was hardly free of the superego, unlike Falstaff, hardly transcendent, unlike Hamlet at the end; hardly in command of every perspective relevant to his own life, unlike Rosalind. But since he imagined all of them, we can assume that he refused to will himself beyond his own limits.'[32] Why such a desperate assertion of the Shakespearean personality should be made is never explained. Indeed Shakespeare's is the most obvious absence from *The Anxiety of Influence*, and in 1973 Bloom could uneasily explain the omission thus:

> The greatest poet in our language is excluded from the argument of this book for several reasons. One is necessarily historical; Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness. Another has to do with the contrast between dramatic and lyric form...the main cause, though, is that Shakespeare's prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor....Shakespeare is the largest instance in the language of a phenomenon that stands outside the concern of this book: the absolute absorption of the precursor.[33]

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[30] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.55.
[31] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.55.
[32] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.56.
[33] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.11

It was an admission that the book as it stood was a kind of Hamlet without the prince, or that Shakespeare ('the greatest poet in our language') was the uncomfortable exception that *disproved* the rule. The 1997 edition does its best to correct this embarrassing solecism. The central thesis of *The Anxiety of Influence* was that strong works of art could be explained as occurring in a direct and powerful line of descent, each from its (inevitable, and needless to say, male) precursor. This theory depends upon a spurious notion of atavistic genius, the 'poet in a poet, or the aboriginal poetic self' as Bloom writes; and also upon a distorted view of historical processes which fails to entertain the notions of contingency and the kind of historical pressure recognised by Greenblatt. The same reliance upon an outmoded notion of genius may explain the curious tone of nostalgia which pervades Bloom's writing, despite his demand for a grittier, more pragmatic view of poetic inspiration. *The Anxiety of Influence* is a lament for a pre-Enlightenment Golden Age, and for all its characterisation of poets as compulsive iconoclasts and distorters of inherited truths, it is a profound complaint against the corruptions of Modern and Post Modern literary projects. The dishonesty of the book lies in its attempt to mask this conservatism and nihilism by means of its falsifying description of literary-historical inevitability:

> The great poets of the English Renaissance are not matched by their Enlightened descendants, and the whole tradition of the post-Enlightenment, which is Romanticism, shows a further decline in its Modernist and Postmodernist heirs. The death of poetry will not be hastened by any reader's broodings, yet it seems just to assume that poetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength.[34]

Bloom's theory is introduced in the form of six 'revisionary ratios' presented as stages in the strong poet's life-cycle. These are, in summary: 1. *Clinamen* or misprision proper: this is a recognisable swerve or corrective movement away from the precursor in the work of a later poet. 2. *Tessera*, which Bloom also terms 'completion and antithesis', here the terms of the precursor poem are adopted wholesale but meant in an altogether different sense. 3. *Kenosis*, which is portrayed as an 'emptying' movement, the apparent renunciation of poetic power before the godhead of the precursor; however

[34] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.10.

it is a strategic move which also effects a weakening of the earlier poet. 4. *Daemonization* or 'a personalized Counter-Sublime'; here the latecomer is prepared to be flooded with power from the earlier poem which he recognises as impersonal; thus the 'uniqueness' of the parent-poem is called into question. 5. *Askesis*: a movement of purgation and separation whose end its the attainment of a state of solitude; this act also creates the illusion of truncation in the precursor's work 6. *Apophrades* or 'the return of the dead': a voluntary holding open of the later work to the former which produces the illusion that the earlier poem has been produced by the latecomer, instead of vice-versa. I shall now briefly examine the means by which, according to *The Anxiety of Influence*, a strong poetic identity is forged. Bloom's first chapter demonstrates, through the often tangled course of its argument, the obsessive self-reflexivity of the book's thesis. The chapter begins by allegorising the initial formation of the poetic character, as it comes into being through an encounter with powerful precursor texts. A distinction is drawn between the reading habits of critics and those of poets:

> poets, by the time they have grown strong, do not read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves. For them, to be judicious is to be weak, and to compare, exactly and fairly, is to be not elect.[35]

The implication is that all critics are necessarily failed poets, the runners-up in an agonistic struggle for achieved selfhood and priority through language: 'Milton's Satan, archetype of the modern poet at his strongest, becomes weak when he reasons and compares,...and so commences that process of decline culminating in *Paradise Regained*, ending as the archetype of the modern critic at his weakest.'[36] Later in the chapter, Bloom betrays an awareness that this observation is something of a truism; 'Is it useful to be told that poets are not common readers, and particularly are not critics, in the true sense of critics, common readers raised to the highest power?'[37] Bloom's expressed wish that his critical work may be accepted as a 'severe poem', indicates that he focuses attention on such distinctions (i.e. 'critic' and 'poet') only to deny them. The fact remains that Bloom's criticism is not poetry, despite its relentless insistence on its own remarkable originality. In the passage quoted above, there is a clear refusal of the

[35] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.19.
[36] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 19-20.

traditional role of the critic, which is precisely to judiciously 'reason and compare,' but that refusal is Bloom's alone. I identify in such a denial an uneasiness concerning critical language itself. According to Bloom, the language of strong poets bears no explicit traces of influence, since the only conceivable point of reference is a strong precursor-poem, and as I have shown, he denies the importance of personal or historical influences. But *exclusive* textual referencing has been the standard remit of the critic, and never the poet. Bloom's argument is therefore a projective one: in the passage just quoted, it becomes clear that he is describing and justifying his own critical technique, which consists of a kind of denial of the distance between his own rhetoric and its object, in this case *Paradise Lost*. In one of the few instances of actual textual analysis the book provides, Bloom proceeds to read *Paradise Lost* as a dramatisation of the struggle-for-selfhood experienced by the modern poet. In reading *Paradise Lost*, Bloom's intention is stated in a manner which perhaps betrays his own latent doubts about the legitimacy of this critical method: 'Let us attempt the experiment (*apparently frivolous*) of reading *Paradise Lost* as an allegory of the dilemma of the modern poet, at his strongest.'[38] (italics mine) Milton's Satan is Bloom's Modern Poet, possessing the essential qualities of intellectual aspiration, power-hunger and rebelliousness. Bloom apparently sees nothing wrong in attributing these characteristics (or their failure to become manifest) to *all* strong poets and their ephebes. It is hardly necessary to state that they are also stereotypically *male* characteristics. A dubious notion of artistic continuity emerges as a principle of primogeniture in Bloom's attempt to justify his apparently arbitrary allegorising:

> Why call Satan a modern poet? Because he shadows forth gigantically a trouble at the core of Milton and of Pope, a sorrow that purifies by isolation in Collins and Gray, in Smart and in Cowper, emerging fully to stand clear in Wordsworth, who is the exemplary Modern Poet, the Poet proper.[39]

What this statement principally indicates is the monomania of Bloom's reading. His poetic genealogy presents itself as the master key to an understanding of all significant poetry produced since the English Renaissance (and, in the preface to the second

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[37] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 30-31.
[38] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.20.
[39] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.20.

edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, all major poetry written before then, too). The stylistic deployment of allegory and fable can in part be understood as a necessary obfuscating and distracting device, intended to shift attention from a disappointingly derivative approach. It provides an answer of sorts to the challenges of New Historicist and other theories; a Bloomian version of '*il n' y a pas de hors- texte,*' despite the appeal (more rigorously expounded elsewhere) to psychoanalysis. Bloom's description of the strong poet's life-cycle begins with a kind of fall into absolute Selfhood, or consciousness of Self:

> 'I *was* God, I *was* man (for to a poet they were the same) and I *am* falling, from myself.' when this consciousness of self is raised to an absolute pitch, *then* the poet hits the floor of Hell, or rather, comes to the bottom of the abyss, and by his impact there creates Hell. He says, 'I seem to have stopped falling; now *I am fallen*, consequently I lie here in Hell.'[40]

Here the poet apparently falls from a plenitude which in poetic terms is difficult to account for. Is it to be understood in psychological terms as a kind of pre-oedipal, pre-linguistic existence? Or the seamless psychological experience of the ordinary person in whom a mysterious poetic urge has not yet made itself felt? The difficulties inherent in this passage are not unlike the old doctrinal mystery of how it was that Lucifer and his angels initially fell, considering they had been created perfect. The passage also reveals another problematic feature of Bloom's work, his failure to explain the place of *time* in his scheme. The reader is left to decide whether the revisionary ratios are timelessly present and visible in the achieved piece of work, and if so how they are to be identified; or whether they are states which have been passed through and overcome in the process of writing, thus belonging to the work's own particular history. The obvious absence of satisfactory textual analysis may indicate that the latter argument is more likely, and if so then it must be surmised that Bloom requires the acceptance of his theories as articles of faith rather than formulae that can be proven. Again, what is gained on the level of critical rhetoric is lost in terms of critical understanding. The Beelzebub which the strong poet encounters on the floor of Hell is 'the talented poet who never quite made it, and now never shall.'[41] Beelzebub is an image of imaginative

[40] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.21.
[41] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.21.

poverty and poetic mediocrity and a salutary warning to Satan, who now turns to his task, of which Bloom writes:

> This task, comprehensive and profoundly imaginative, includes everything that we could ascribe as motivation for the writing of any poetry that is not strictly devotional in its purposes. For why do men write poems? To rally everything that remains, and not to sanctify nor propound.[42]

Almost as an aside, Bloom, for reasons he fails to provide, intends to exclude from his argument all poetry of a religious nature. It could well be argued that this includes most of the best poetry in the language, whether or not it contains an explicitly devotional element. Moreover, this stance is adopted during his own examination of one of the great religious poems in the Western tradition. This is an explicit exclusion of the philosophical and devotional elements in poetry in favour of a Nietzschean will-to-power, and constitutes an unhelpful narrowing of the terms in which poetry can be discussed. It is a prohibitive stance guaranteed to lead to the imaginative poverty which it claims only to identify, and is also indicative of the imaginative poverty of Bloom's own reading, since this curtailment of ethical or religious or historical considerations is simultaneously a denial of poetry's possible external influences. The 'death of poetry' lugubriously foreseen above is more likely to be hastened by Bloom's wilful repudiation of its context. The obsession with subjectivity characteristic of Bloom's self-reflexive mode continues with a discussion of the importance of solipsism. I append a lengthy quotation which is intended to demonstrate further the needless muddying of Bloom's argument by the obliquity of his style:

> This is a heroism that is exactly on the border of solipsism, neither within it, nor beyond it. Satan's later decline in the poem, as arranged by the idiot questioner in Milton, is that the hero retreats from this border into solipsism, and so is degraded; ceases, during his soliloquy on Mount Niphates, to be a poet and, by intoning the formula 'Evil be thou my good' becomes a mere rebel, a childish inverter of conventional moral categories, another wearisome ancestor of student non-students, the perpetual New Left. For the modern poet, in the gladness of his sorrowing strength, stands always on the farther verge of solipsism, having just emerged from it. His difficult balance, from Wordsworth to Stevens, is to maintain a stance just there, where by his very presence

[42] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.22.

> he says: 'What I see and hear come not but from myself' and yet also:
> 'I have not but I am and as I am I am.'[43]

The ahistorical dottiness of this reading, which sees Milton's Satan as, bizarrely, a model of one of his less industrious, vocally left-wing students, is scarcely worth pausing over. But the emphasis on achieved selfhood is important. For Bloom, 'being a poet' is the most authentic mode of being conceivable. Apparently this only becomes possible by means of a detachment of the poetic function from all social or political referents. Also, it seems to have nothing to do with the recognisable content of a poet's work, with considerations of voice or tone, those markers of what is usually regarded as originality in poetry. Bloom seems to mean his idea of poetic selfhood in a purely professional or social sense. His heroic quester is the conservative and professional, one in whom the struggle for identity, despite its dramatic cast, is no more threatening than the disaffected elements he so readily discounts. The penalty for failing in the agonistic struggle is (despite the psychoanalytic emphasis) not death or madness, but the humiliation of poetic mediocrity, a condition which the critic, with his three or four hundred years' hindsight, is most aptly placed to diagnose. The weakness of this argument results from an unconscious realization that when texts are removed from their social, historical, or religious contexts, or indeed from the practical, if dry realm of source-study, all that remains is to attempt the resuscitation of an outmoded belle-lettristic criticism in the guise of a pseudo-humanist approach. This is nevertheless a viewpoint saturated with political implications in the America in which Bloom writes, and he betrays a telling awareness of this in the aggressively-written first chapter of *The Western Canon*:

> I myself insist that the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value. But 'the individual self,' I unhappily grant, is defined only against society, and part of its agon with the communal inevitably partakes of the conflict between social and economic classes. Myself the son of a garment worker, I have been granted endless time to read and meditate upon my reading....All my passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood's aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community.[44]

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[43] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.22.
[44] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 23.

Bloom appears to acknowledge the truth of his own concerns in the following paragraph, albeit by means of a rather questionable analogy: ' There is always guilt in achieved individuality; it is a version of the guilt of being a survivor and is not productive of aesthetic value.'[45] It therefore disappointing when Bloom permits himself the following comments:

> Very few working-class readers ever matter in determining the survival of texts, and left-wing critics cannot do the working class's reading for it. Aesthetic value rises out of memory, and so, (as Nietszche saw) out of pain, the pain of surrendering easier pleasures in favor of much more difficult ones. *Workers have anxieties enough and turn to religion as one mode of relief.* Their sure sense that the aesthetic is, for them, only another anxiety helps to teach us that successful literary works are achieved anxieties, not releases from anxieties. Canons, too, are achieved anxieties, not unified props of morality....[46] (italics mine)

Bizarrely, Bloom seems only a step away from Marx with his 'opium of the people'. He confuses an argument about access by raising the (curiously Platonic) question of guardianship. Those who ensure the 'survival of texts' are not the possessors of them as property. It might well be suggested that Bloom underestimates a proletariat anxious in the face of literary heritage. Exclusion is surely the greatest generator of anxiety. Moreover the inference that religion is merely a less taxing form of consolation whereas the aesthetic realm is where the truly hard-won struggles are fought is offensive alike to poet and 'working class.' The very fact, however, that Bloom is compelled to voice these concerns in *The Western Canon* casts light upon his stance in *The Anxiety of Influence*. From what can be read as the cry of the embattled critic: 'There are no objects outside of me because I see into their life, which is one with my own, and so I am that I am,'[47] Bloom continues with a criticism of his eminent predecessors: 'It is sad to observe most modern critics observing Satan, because they never do observe him. The catalog of unseeing could hardly be more distinguished, from Eliot...to Northrop Frye..'[48] It is difficult to understand at this point the precise difference between Bloomian misreading, productive of originality and so a virtue, and the misinterpretations of these critics which he so abhors.

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[45] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.23.
[46] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.38.
[47] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.23.

Bloom proceeds with a description of the incarnation of the poetic self, in which he is conceived as being passively 'discovered by' the dialectic of poetic influence: 'Though all such discovery is a self-recognition, indeed a Second Birth, and ought, in the pure good of theory, to be accomplished in a perfect solipsism, it is an act never complete in itself.'[49] The young poet experiences the 'shame and splendor' of being found by the great poems of his predecessors. The shame of origins, the fear that he is not himself, leads the ephebe to an action for which Bloom finds the Kierkegaardian maxim 'He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father' to be appropriate. It is therefore puzzling when, a few paragraphs later, following a brief etymological history of the term 'influence,' Bloom claims that true influence-anxiety rose with 'the post Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime' and its recognition that, for the first time, 'Art was beyond hard work.' The contradiction is immediately apparent. Bloom's portentously capitalised terminology for the influence process, lifted from Blake, Milton, Biblical and occult sources, is here used to describe a contingent historical phenomenon, although Bloom does claim at one point that 'the anxiety had long proceeded the usage.' Bloom betrays a consciousness of this flaw in his subsequent works, most notably of all *The Western Canon,* where he neatly backtracks upon this earlier study and claims for the influence process the status of a *permanent* quality of mind present in all strong writers. To say that Bloom's theory of influence and identity is shot through with contradictions is to understate the case. I have demonstrated the way in which his theory licenses a dismissal of all external concerns from the arena of poetic self-fashioning. That this significantly affects his interpretation of women writers is obvious; Bloom tends simply to dismiss gender considerations in poetry, and in fact scarcely ever considers women as strong writers. The significant exception to this, as I illustrate in my next chapter, is Emily Dickinson.

Among the many shortcomings of Bloom's model, and another example of its blindness to extra-textual factors, is its failure to recognize or criticise the obvious gender-bias of its own Freudian model. Indeed, this is where Bloom's own defensiveness comes most sharply into focus, as he has not disguised his hostility towards feminist aesthetics and theories of influence. This study does not intend to

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[48] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.23.
[49] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.25.

provide an exclusively feminist reading of the influence process and the formation of poetic selves, since such an approach would thereby merely perpetuate the narrowness of which Bloom's theory is symptomatic. However an examination of the final section of Bloom's *The Western Canon* will show that among the writers he has chosen to omit from his 'canonical prophecy' is Sylvia Plath. If part of Bloom's criterion for selection is a writer's influential power, then his omission of Plath is surely a mistake, whether or not Plath's influence can be said to have been wholly benign.[50] He is similarly reluctant to include writers from the African-American tradition, writing scathingly,

> As the formulator of a critical concept I once named 'The Anxiety of Influence' I have enjoyed the School of Resentment's repeated insistence that such a notion applies only to Dead White European Males, and not to women and to what we quaintly term 'multiculturalists.' Thus, feminist cheerleaders proclaim that women writers lovingly co-operate with one another as quilt-makers, while African American and Chicano literary activists go even further in asserting their freedom from any anguish of contamination whatsoever: each of them is Adam early in the morning. They know no time when they were not as they are now; self-created, self-begot, their puissance is their own.[51]

Here Bloom signally fails to admit the limitations of his own approach, and one of the most telling difficulties that women writers and writers from other traditions face. The counter-argument is by now a familiar one, and has been stated many times; namely that the automatic and largely unconscious oedipal struggles which Bloom describes can more easily be ascribed to writers who share the same language, social background, intellectual training, and gender. Bloom fails to demonstrate exactly *how* Shakespeare or Dryden could be expected to communicate directly to anyone *other* than a white European or American male, that there may be more than one way of reading a tradition, and finally, more than one tradition. Also, as I have already stated, the problem is frequently a practical one, that of access to such texts. It is a problem which is especially pertinent in Bloom's own country, and one which he has explicitly acknowledged, as we have shown. Yet to deny such a writer publication or credence would also deny the often messy and arbitrary, surprising origins of many great works of literature. Bloom does not acknowledge that women writers especially have had to

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[50] I examine Bloom's more explicit dismissal of Plath in my final chapter, see p. 211, below.

[51] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.7

confront systems of exclusion which are encoded in the very canonical works he praises. Later I examine the contexts against which the work of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath has come to be defined, and speculate about the impact of such pressures on their poetry. Far from the overwhelming presence of a threatening precursor, women writers have frequently had to encounter the depletion of their own gendered literary inheritance, finding little or no precedent for their instinctive subject matter. John Donne, in a wholly different context, aptly diagnosed the extreme necessity which results: 'For his art did express/ A quintessence even from nothingness,/ From dull privations, and lean emptiness/ He ruined me, and I am re-begot/ Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.'[52] In each instance I examine I hope to demonstrate that while the external 'space' of a work may to some extent dictate its identity, to reduce that work to its circumstances is to be over-emphatic.

'Efforts of Affection:' The Complex and the Simplex

I have also shown how Bloom's outrageous misreading of Freud belittles the referential claims of Freudian texts while simultaneously adopting without criticism the oedipal narrative of those texts. The result of this is that Bloom's own theory of the anxiety of influence is, as has frequently been recognised, overwhelmingly oedipal in emphasis. Like Freud (but much more wilfully), Bloom seems unable—or unwilling—to find a place for women writers within this framework. Bloom's wholesale hostility to feminist criticism and his suspicion of women writers who foreground their gender has provoked a number of significant responses to his influence-anxiety theories, in which women critics have attempted to adapt the psychoanalytic basis of his theories for their own ends. In many ways, however, Bloom is a clear indicator of the inherent shortcomings of a psychoanalytic approach. The emphasis on unconscious, defensive processes is, for one thing, overly negative in emphasis. This negativity has one clear outcome in that it places a great deal of faith in the superior and vaguely scientific skills of the critic in the delineation of the poetic consciousness or self. In doing this is cannot help but reduce the writer to a cluster of wholly predictable impulses and

[52] John Donne: 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day' in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C.A,. Patrides (London: J.M. Dent, 1985), pp. 90-92

complexes, because psychoanalysis is concerned with what (in her own psyche) the subject is *not* master of. In my view this simply robs women of the empowering and important notion of *consciousness* in poetry, a notion with which this thesis is explicitly concerned. To adopt the psychoanalytic approach is simply to play into the hands of critics like Bloom.

Bloom's study has spawned a number of similar, psychoanalysis-based studies of influence between women writers. Any survey of the growing literature on this subject would be incomplete without an examination of some of the more important and theoretically plausible contributions to the field. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1987) represents Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's contribution to the debate. This three volume study comprises no less a comprehensive survey than Bloom had attempted, but from a resolutely feminist perspective. In a chapter entitled 'Tradition and the Female Talent; Modernism and Masculinism,' Gilbert and Gubar suggest that 'a reaction-formation against the rise of literary women became not just a theme in modernist writing but a motive for modernism,'[53] and claim that the high modernist tradition was inherently alienating to women: 'the excavation of ['the mind of Europe's'] fragments functions simultaneously to counter and to recover the noble fatherhood of precursors from Homer to Dante and Shakespeare, while the linguistic innovation associated with the *avant garde*—the use of puns, allusions, phrases in foreign languages, arcane and fractured forms—functions to occult language so that only an initiated elite can participate in the community of high culture.'[54] Gilbert and Gubar's theory is shadowed throughout by this conviction that modernism was instigated primarily in order to exclude writing women. A significant part of Eliot's modernist aesthetic, it is claimed, 'constructs an implicitly masculine aesthetic of hard, abstract, learned verse that is opposed to the aesthetic of soft, effusive, personal verse supposedly written by women and Romantics'[55] In my chapters on Dickinson and H.D. in particular, I shall be examining the responses such a sense of exclusion may have provoked. However I believe that the arguments put forward by Gilbert and Gubar are also exclusionist in

[53] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land 1: The War of The Words*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), p. 156
[54] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 156
[55] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 155

their way, and are therefore in danger of perpetuating the essentialist stereotyping they wish to discount. It is true that Joyce claimed Eliot's 'Waste Land' 'ends [the] idea of poetry for ladies'[56] but Gilbert and Gubar fail to acknowledge that female modernists like H.D. may *also* have been in reaction against e.e. cummings' 'Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls.' They comment disapprovingly upon Hawthorne's scornful dismissal of his 'damned mob of scribbling women'[57] (never admitting that the tradition of Victorian female sentimental verse produced some appalling writing) and catalogue the misogynistic comments of modernist writers from Joyce to Mailer in order to support their claim. That their valorisation of women poets' direct responses is perhaps overemphatic never occurs to them. Amy Lowell's attack on Pound and Eliot is singled out as a particularly significant example of this 'crucial act of aesthetic assertion.'[58] ('Pound believes he's a thinker, but he's far too romantic/ Eliot's sure he's a poet when he's only pedantic'[59]) Similarly, there is an unpleasant voyeurism and a misuse of biography in their analysis of Sylvia Plath's poem 'Burning the Letters' (described as 'the most passionate, poignant, and in a sense representative spell cast against a figure whom we have seen... as a paradigmatic man of letters'[60]) This is indicative of the volume's larger failure; its misuse of both psychoanalytical and literary texts to establish a grand, totalising narrative detailing male writers' (deliberate) oppression of their female counterparts. Chapter Four of this study ''Forward into the Past:' The Female Affiliation Complex' presents a simplistic misreading of both Freudian theory and superficial literary content. It is nevertheless instructive for this chapter, since, like *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, it can be shown to demonstrate a disregard for the crucial differences between the spheres of literature and psychoanalysis.

Gilbert and Gubar claim that 'women experience the dynamics of maternal literary inheritance differently from the way men do,'[61] and that women writers 'have at last begun to experience an anxiety about the binds and burdens of the past that can be understood in terms comparable to (if different from) those Harold Bloom extrapolates

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[56] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 156
[57] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 142
[58] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 217
[59] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 219
[60] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 220

from Freud's writings about psychosexual development.'[62] It is clear that Gilbert and Gubar also conceive of female poetic influence as an 'achieved' anxiety, and in general their study betrays a heavy indebtedness to Bloom, not least in their uncritical use of Freud's 1931 essay 'Female Sexuality.' Gilbert and Gubar follow Freud's assertion that the growing girl 'may follow one of three lines of development' when, as she enters the Oedipal phase, she definitively confronts the fact of her femininity.'[63] Freud's interpretation of the girl's psychosexual development is explained as follows:

> Frightened by the comparison of herself with boys, [she]... gives up her phallic activity... and a considerable part of her masculine proclivities in other fields. If she pursues the second line, she clings in obstinate self-assertion to her threatened masculinity... whilst the phantasy of really being a man in spite of everything, often dominates long periods of her life. This 'masculinity complex' may also result in a manifestly homosexual object choice. Only if her development follows the third... path does she arrive at the ultimate normal feminine attitude in which she takes her father as love-object, and thus arrives at the Oedipus complex in its feminine form.[64]

Gilbert and Gubar's use of Freud is surprisingly uncritical, given the obvious late Victorian gender-bias of his conclusions. They revise his notions into a three-fold theory of female artistic influence which is both descriptive and prescriptive. Either the little girl/ ephebe can renounce her inadequate or absent mother and turn towards the tradition of the father, involving an 'enormous investment of psychic energy'[65] which all but exhausts her creative resources, ensuring that she will be at best a weaker copy of her literary forefathers; or she may frigidly reject both father and mother, stifling her own creative drive in the process; or she may choose 'homosexuality,' turning to a 'maternal tradition,' which leads to what Gilbert and Gubar term 'the Female Affiliation Complex.' There is, it is claimed, a specific etymological justification for their choice of this term:

> the word 'affiliation' derives from the gender-symmetrical Latin filia and filius, words which, if not legally at least linguistically, represent an equality of inheritance...most interestingly, the American Heritage Dictionary traces

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[61] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land,* p. 166
[62] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land,* p. 166
[63] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land,* p. 167
[64] Glbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land,* p. 168
[65] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land,* p. 169

> the word back to the Indo-European 'dhei,' meaning 'to suck,' a word etymologically connected with 'she who suckles.' Thus, though lexical evolution may have erased ... the female origins of this word...the word itself preserves matrilineal traces and specifically the idea of a nurturing and nurtured female.[66]

Gilbert and Gubar identify oppressors everywhere. The spurious notion of authority which they claim for their term is echoed in their untroubled use of one of Freud's more fanciful analogies:

> Indeed, the contrast between the secondary but now dominant maleness attributed to the word and its female linguistic roots reiterates Freud's own paradigm of the psychohistorically constructed female Oedipus complex, which obscures the girl's pre-Oedipal phase in just the way the relics of Greek civilization eclipse the remains of [matriarchal] Minoan-Mycenaean culture.[67]

This lack of regard for the minutiae of historical causality is a consistent feature of Gilbert and Gubar's analysis. It is unscholarly and misleading. More pertinently, it represents another instance of ignoring the simple fact that analogies between these disciplines are precisely that, analogies. Even Freud himself, in his essay 'Civilization and its Discontents', states his reservations about the usefulness of analogy as a critical tool: 'but we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved.'[68] Surely this is a statement which the literary critic who relies on psychoanalysis would do well to bear in mind. But Gilbert and Gubar's study exemplifies this tendency, and this becomes clearer as we examine the prescriptive function of the affiliation complex as they see it. Again with an eye to etymology, they reject the term 'influence' as inherently disempowering: 'unlike 'influence,' then, which connotes an influx or pouring-in of external power, and 'authorship,' which stands for an originatory primacy, the concept of affiliation carries with it possibilities of both choice and continuity. Choice: one may consciously or not decide with whom to affiliate—align or join—oneself. Continuity: one is thereby linked into a constructed

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[66] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 170
[67] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 170
[68] Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', in *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 9, p. 258

genealogical order which has its own quasi-familial inevitability'[69] What this fails to acknowledge is that any psychologically justified study of influence must by definition base itself on an analysis of *unconscious* processes and compulsions. As psychoanalysis claims to read the deep structures of the mind, so psychoanalytic criticism has claimed to highlight the unconscious subtext of the literary artefact. Indeed, if one were to follow Gilbert and Gubar's example and invoke dictionary definitions it would be necessary to dispute their use of the word 'complex,' defined by the *OED* as: 'a group of emotional impulses that have been banished from the conscious mind but continue to influence a person's behaviour.' Gilbert and Gubar here use psychological theory in what Bloom has called a 'rhetorical' fashion, i.e. they usurp it for their own purposes with neither an awareness of its context nor a critical questioning of its claims to truth. Their application of the theory, moreover, exhibits (like Bloom's analysis of Milton's Satan) an over-simplified view of literary *content*. One striking example of this is their use of Dickinson's poem 'I rose—because He sank.' (J.616) Gilbert and Gubar claim this as a classic analysis of the male-female literary agon: 'her words hint that the deconstruction of 'his' primacy must be countered by a reassuring female commitment to reconstruction.'[70] Dickinson's poem, therefore, is 'about' the deconstruction of male literary primacy, and this seems to be its only function, as a poem, for Gilbert and Gubar. The possibility of interpreting it as a religious poem or as a Christian parable of compassion is never admitted, presumably because this is a too-conventional idea. But this is an equally valid and in many ways much more plausible interpretation. Gilbert and Gubar themselves give a brief, if regretful, acknowledgement of criticism's dependent status later in their study: 'though both criticism and fiction based on critical revision attempt to recover timeless instances of literary authority, even criticism is to some extent constrained by causality. To contextualize a text, after all, is to historicize it.'[71] This is an admission of the final dependence of any theory upon fact; here, the undeniable fact of an absence of literary foremothers. Gilbert and Gubar see lyric poetry as an answer to this problem: 'the lyric, however, can evoke fantastic (utopian or dystopian) moments of being in which the female precursor may openly function as a

[69] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 171
[70] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 172
[71] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 211

muse or an anti-muse for the daughter artist.' It is the 'openness' of the poet's function here which is troubling. Bloom claims that the successful poet is the one who has successfully *evaded* the burden of indebtedness, whereas Gilbert and Gubar see this indebtedness as a fact to be celebrated, and made explicit in a poem. It can be argued, therefore, that their theory works against the idea of the autonomous female artist, drawing her into a complicated relationship to literary forerunners and descendants which will directly affect the way she produces her work. This paradoxically weakens the already praised visionary aspect of female poetry. Gilbert and Gubar do not state their opinion on Elizabeth Bishop's known hostility to exclusionist notions of literary worth, and her consistent refusal of permission for her work to be anthologised on the basis of her gender. An examination of literary tradition and influence surely cannot be simplistically gender-specific. For a female writer to influence a male counterpart is surely a mark of power, but this is a possibility which Gilbert and Gubar never admit. Indeed Bishop, whose sexual preferences would presumably place her in the third of Gilbert and Gubar's developmental categories, was deeply influenced by one of her male peers, Robert Lowell, finding his poetry 'so strongly influential that if I start reading it when I'm working on something of my own I'm lost.'[72] Similarly, H.D. can be said to have profoundly influenced Pound and various other writers with whom she was in contact during her earliest years in pre-war London. But Gilbert and Gubar are so hostile to the notion male-female influence that they are led to identify George Eliot's work as an example of 'male mimicry': 'by mimicking male precursors, they sought an influx of patriarchal power.'[73] The implication is that no female writer who shares serious interests with men can be a 'real' woman writer, an opinion which is in its own way bizarrely misogynistic.

Gilbert and Gubar's study has been shown to participate in the analogical confusion evidenced by Bloom's use of psychoanalytic texts. I have explained how its unsophisticated application of Freudian notions of female sexuality to the history of female literary production works against, rather than supports, its revisionist claims. Another more recent study of female poetic influence, Joanne Feit Diehl's *Elizabeth*

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[72] Elizabeth Bishop, in David Kalstone: *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 131

[73] Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 185

Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity, represents a significant advance on Gilbert and Gubar's work for two principal reasons; firstly it is narrower in scope, and secondly, it displays a greater familiarity with, and comprehension of, its own psychoanalytic basis. Feit Diehl has also stated the limitations of Gilbert and Gubar's approach: 'the equivalence Gilbert and Gubar assume between psychoanalysis and literary history reinscribes certain assumptions about female psychosexual development that warrant renewed investigation.'[74] and further,

> that it is only by going beyond the historically implicated Freudian model that we can re-examine the dynamic of women's relation to the literary tradition. The premise that one can 'select' a literary foremother, thereby exercising an 'adoptive imperative' while offering a hopeful if always difficult resolution for the vexed situation in which women writers find themselves, fails to acknowledge the psychoanalytic observation that none of us (male or female) freely selects any object relation, that no matter whom we choose we re-enact in that new relation the interactional patterns we carry with us from our earliest past.[75]

Her point about the instinctual nature of object relations and of similar psychological impulses is well made. This is a fact which Bloom at least has provided for, with his description of how an ephebe is 'found' by a powerful precursor poem (analogous to the helplessness of the male child enmeshed in oedipal toils). Feit Diehl rejects the Freudian model of psychosexual development and instead posits an alternative model for the dynamic of female influence, one based upon the findings of Melanie Klein in her essays 'Envy and Gratitude', 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse', and 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States.' Klein's model of psychological development (and subsequent interpretations of it) declares that a child's love is object-directed and libidinal from the first. This is in opposition to Freudian ego-psychology, which argues for a primary narcissism and autoeroticism on the part of the infant and maintains that its first experience of object relations derives primarily from its need for food. In Klein, the child's source of nourishment and relief from anxiety-inducing hunger, the maternal breast, comes to stand metonymically for the mother, the child's 'good object,' and

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[74] Joanne Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity*, (Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 4

only by extension the child's environment. This is the basis for stability and trust in the personality: 'The good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself.' However the process is rarely achieved smoothly, as Klein explains: 'If birth has been difficult, and in particular if it results in complications such as a lack of oxygen, a disturbance in the adaptation to the external world occurs and the relation to the breast starts at a great disadvantage. In such cases the baby's ability to experience new sources of gratification is impaired and in consequence he cannot sufficiently internalise a really good primal object.'[76] Where the primal object has not been successfully established, Klein maintains, the child retains a negative image of the breast, and with it paranoid fantasies that the breast contains poisonous substances. The child in turn fantasises about destroying the object, source of nourishment but also (because it is sometimes withheld) of deep anxiety and pain. Healthy psychological development depends, according to Klein, upon the child's working through its 'paranoid-schizoid' position, and reaching a stage which is described as the 'depressive position.' At this stage, the child experiences depressive guilt for its destructive fantasies, and desires to make reparation to the object which has been wronged in fantasy. Empathetic (and moral) emotions such as guilt and pity thus make their appearance in the psyche. Klein's theories, as Feit Diehl has recognised, have a potentially strong relevance for theories of creativity and influence. Klein herself sees the 'good breast' as the archetype of creativeness: 'the "good" breast that feeds and initiates the love relation to the mother is the representative of the life instinct and is also felt as the first manifestation of creativeness...if the identification with a good and life-giving object can be maintained, this becomes an impetus towards creativeness...the capacity to give and to preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest cause for envy.'[77] Feit Diehl maintains that Klein's theories can instructively be utilised in an examination of the history of female poetic influence, since they

> illuminate our understanding of the anxieties a woman writer may experience

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[75] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 4

[76] Melanie Klein, 'Envy and Gratitude' in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, (London: Virago, 1988), p. 184

[77] Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, p. 188

> as she turns to her female literary precursor for inspiration and at the same time senses the fragility of her female predecessor's position vis-à-vis the dominant tradition of male authorship. A desire to do damage to the 'mother' who is already at risk becomes yet another factor in the vexed situation of the woman writer who would align herself with an alternative female tradition because she simultaneously wishes to be endowed with the power associated with masculine-identified literary authority.[78]

Feit Diehl proceeds to examine the operation of envy (representing this primal urge to destroy creativeness) and gratitude (representing the need to make reparation to the source of life) in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. She attempts this by boldly applying Kleinian theories to an examination of Bishop's relationship to her most significant precursor, Marianne Moore. In her introduction, Feit Diehl states that the theoretical basis for her study 'depends upon an understanding of intertextual relationships as analogous to the transferential and countertransferential exchanges of the analysand and analyst' and that 'there exists an authorial psyche with which other psyches interact, and that this psyche (albeit at times unbeknownst to itself) re-enacts its internalised intrapsychic experiences, its memories and desires, within the texts it creates.'[79] I have already, in my examination of Bloom's and Gilbert and Gubar's use of Freudian ideas, subjected to scrutiny the notion of an analogous relationship between texts which describe the workings of the psyche and literary texts. It is noteworthy that Feit Diehl also invokes a psychoanalytic analogy, this time of the analysis-situation and the transference process, to describe the Bishop-Moore relationship. By examining in some detail the first chapter of Feit Diehl's study and the conclusions drawn therefrom, I intend to demonstrate the continuing inadequacy of a model which relies solely on notions of interpsychic influence.

Chapter one of Feit Diehl's study is entitled ' 'Efforts of Affection': Toward a Theory of Female Poetic Influence.' Here, the text under study is Elizabeth Bishop's posthumously published memoir of Moore. Feit Diehl highlights areas of ambivalence in the text which, it is claimed, point to the mechanisms of envy and guilt at work in Bishop's attitude to her most powerful precursor. Bishop and Moore had first met in 1934, in circumstances detailed with some amusement by the younger poet:

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[78] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p.5

> She was forty-seven, an age that seemed old to me then, and her hair was mixed with white to a faint rust pink, and her rust-pink eyebrows were frosted with white. The large flat black hat was as I'd expected it to be. She wore a blue tweed suit that day and, as she usually did then, a man's 'polo shirt,' as they were called, with a black bow at the neck. The effect was quaint, vaguely Bryn Mawr 1909, but stylish at the same time. [80]

Feit Diehl claims that this description is an example of Bishop's deep ambivalence towards Moore: 'note specifically how, in regard to dress, Bishop attempts to antique her...' Continuing in a humorous vein, Bishop describes how, when the two poets visited the circus together, Moore wished to cut some hairs from a baby elephant's head to repair her elephant hair bracelet: 'I was to divert the adult elephants with the bread, and, if we were lucky, the guards wouldn't observe her at the end of the line where the babies were, and she could take out her scissors and snip a few hairs from a baby's head, to repair her bracelet.' [81] According to Feit Diehl, this account 'contains elements that suggest a more ambivalent story...humor rather than silencing permits the aggression of Moore's gesture to slip by almost unnoticed. Moore triumphs; she gets the elephant hairs; but the need to appropriate, to take something from an animal to replace what she herself has lost, and her use of Bishop to complete the act, suggest a kind of violation as well.'[82] However Feit Diehl's interpretation of this anecdote in Bishop's memoir is surely mistaken in its emphasis, and I regard this as indicative of her wider misinterpretation of Bishop's tone. Throughout the memoir, Bishop is at pains to stress Moore's uniqueness. The use of this anecdote, far from suggesting an act of aggression, hints at Moore's subversive and surprising character. The implication is that Moore is at home among curious and exotic animals, so often the subject of her poetry.[83] Feit Diehl would maintain that Bishop's ambivalent subtext is largely unconscious, but surely this is to deny Bishop her own intentionality, her artistry and control. (Robert Lowell was referring to her highly self-conscious and deceptively unobtrusive style when he described her as 'unerring muse who makes the casual

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[79] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, pp. 5-6

[80] Elizabeth Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection,' in *Elizabeth Bishop, the Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p.124

[81] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection' p.125

[82] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 20

[83] Cf. the equally humorous comment by the elder Mrs. Moore later in the same work: "Yes. I am so *glad* that Marianne has *decided* to give the inhabitants of the *zoo*...a *rest*." Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection', p. 129.

perfect.') Feit Diehl largely ignores the fact that Bishop is working within a recognised essay form, and that her awareness of the conventions of that form necessarily shape her selection and treatment of material.[84] In other words, she fails to acknowledge the purely formal element of Bishop's memoir, examining it as though it were a straightforward depiction of a relationship or an account given in the course of psychoanalysis, instead of a very skilful portrait. Moreover, any interpretation of a text should show that it betrays some awareness of its potential audience; in this case, an audience which would be quite well aware of Marianne Moore's eccentricities. The memoir possesses something of the flavour of a shared joke—it deliberately perpetuates the popular myth surrounding Moore. Feit Diehl singles out other characteristics of Moore emphasised by Bishop; her habit of secreting food, her extreme politeness and solicitude, the jar of change she kept on her bookcase for the subway fares of visitors. Preposterously, these habits are described as 'the 'good mother's' standard, hidden weapons that breed her child's growing resentment. How could anyone resent someone so thoughtful? How could anyone not?'[85] There is a kind of overdetermination about Feit Diehl's interpretation of these incidents, a feature which is likely to be the outcome of late twentieth century feminism's projection of its own anxieties into the past. Bishop is generous enough to recognize in Moore the vestiges of an obsolescent order, and independent enough to grant it much value:

> The atmosphere of 260 Cumberland Street was of course 'old-fashioned,' but even more, otherworldly—as if one were living in a diving bell from a different world, let down through the crass atmosphere of the twentieth century. Leaving the diving bell with one's nickel, during the walk to the subway and the forty-five minute ride back to Manhattan, one was apt to have a slight case of mental or moral bends—so many things to be remembered; stories, phrases, the unaccustomed deference, the exquisitely prolonged etiquette—these were hard to reconcile with the New Lots Avenue express and the awful, jolting ride facing a row of indifferent faces. Yet I never left Cumberland Street without feeling happier: uplifted, even inspired, determined to be good, to work harder, not to worry about what other people thought, never to try to publish anything until I thought I'd done my best with it, no matter how many years it took—or never to publish at all.[86]

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[84] A consideration which is especially pertinent in this case, since an essay written in appreciation of Moore is an explicit acknowledgement of Moore's public profile and of the likely readership of both poets. This is *not* a private narrative, even though the essay was not published until after Bishop's death.
[85] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 21
[86] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection' p.137

I maintain that the repressed element of Bishop's narrative here is her disapproval at the decline of objective literary standards. Considering her own perfectionism, Bishop is hardly likely to be disapproving of Moore's. Yet Feit Diehl writes: 'Moore's ...perfectionism could be daunting and, the obsessiveness that went along with it, destructive.'[87] To argue thus is to miss the main premise of Bishop's essay, that Moore represented an aesthetic and standard of excellence which is lamentably rare: 'Was the explanation simply that she had a more sensitive ear than most of us, and since she had started writing at a time when poetry was undergoing drastic changes, she had been free to make the most of it and experiment as she saw fit?... I contributed next to nothing to the La Fontaine—a few rhymes and metrically smoothed-out or slicked-up lines. But they made me realize more than I ever had the rarity of true originality, and also the sort of alienation it might involve.'[88] Bishop's portrait of Moore is remarkably similar to the many bemused descriptions of Emily Dickinson by her first reviewers, but Bishop is shrewd enough to recognize in Moore the existence of an ethical/aesthetic imperative, later referring to her 'scrupulous and strict honesty.'[89] Clearly, an emphasis on poetic tact and fidelity were some of the most important features of Moore's influence upon Bishop. It becomes clear therefore that Feit Diehl's psychoanalytic model has a mistaken emphasis. Her assertion is that Bishop's 'silence' on matters where she would presumably have disagreed with Moore indicates guilt and submissiveness: 'charming as it may sometimes be, such rigidly erratic maternal behaviour can create in her daughter confusion about life, priorities, and, finally, reality itself.'[90] But here, I would argue, is where Feit Diehl, after the fashion of Bloom, confuses her analogical reading of the texts of Klein and Bishop. To Feit Diehl, Bishop's essay stops being an essay and becomes a symptom. I have already described Bloom's awareness of this problem with the psychoanalytic approach and his attempts to overcome it by reversing the two terms of the equation. Marianne Moore was not literally Bishop's mother. Moreover, Feit Diehl's argument implies that the aesthetic impulse is in some sense determined by Bishop's actual pre-oedipal object

[87] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore,* p.29
[88] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection,' p. 140
[89] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection,' p.140
[90] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore,* p. 38

relations (about which Feit Diehl can know nothing), and it also reinscribes the notion that art is partly to be explained as the outcome of psychopathology: 'the compensatory nature of object-relations aesthetics gestures towards a fundamental theory of art: namely, that creativity springs from the desire to make reparation to the limited mother, to return to the holding environment reconceived by the daughter-poet, an environment that through its reformulation attempts to make up the deficit of the original, infantile relation.'[91] This reinstates the Freudian idea of art as simply compensatory. Bishop's 'silence' and self-effacement are familiar enough strategies to any reader of her work. If there are 'ambivalences' (although 'irritations' is possibly a less loaded word) in Bishop's attitude to Moore, I would argue that her narrative shows itself to be well aware of them: 'I confess to one very slight grudge: she did use a phrase of mine once without a note...It was so thoroughly out of character for her to do this that I have never understood it. I am sometimes appalled to think how much I may have unconsciously stolen from her.'[92]

Feit Diehl makes much of 'the obvious sexual reference' in the line to which Bishop refers; 'the bell-boy with the buoy-ball' in Moore's 'Four Quartz Crystal Clocks', even suggesting that 'perhaps Bishop's including the incident is her way of quietly getting back at the prudish, unworldly Moore who has used her phrase but has not understood it.'[93] This is a somewhat cynical misreading of Bishop's essay, but it indicates another flaw of Feit Diehl's approach, and psychoanalytic approaches generally: its tendency to reduce all artistic impulses to sexual terms. One noticeable feature of Bishop's memoir is that it *is* a largely desexualised narrative. However, rather than identify repressed conflict and daughterly guilt in this, the reader is likely to appreciate the facets of Moore's character that this omission liberates, while her attitude to sexual matters is a further source of affectionate humour: 'Marianne, increasingly so with age, was capable of calling a spade a spade, or at least calling it by its archaic name. I remember her worrying about the fate of a mutual friend whose sexual tastes had always seemed quite obvious to me: 'what are we going to do about x...? Why, sometimes I think he may

[91] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p.108
[92] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection,' p. 141
[93] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p. 30

even be in the clutches of a *sodomite*...!''[94] One may well imagine that such topics were not openly discussed in the Moore household, but it is only twentieth-century psychoanalysis-inspired feminism which sees this as a crime. When Feit Diehl speaks of 'Moore's problematic relation to her own sexuality,' as another subtext of Bishop's narrative, she negates both the principle of selection at work in the piece, and the idea of artistic tact. Feit Diehl's application of Kleinian object-relations theory to Bishop's work is clearly reductive. In common with much psychoanalytic criticism, this reading aims to provide a psychological profile of the author, reconstructed from her work, 'enabling us to read her work with an attentiveness to the deep structure and governing origins of her imagination,'[95] and 'shedding light on the distinctive workings of Bishop's *intrapsychic* life'[96] Such an aim is surely dubious, and moreover implies that a work of art is reducible to the impulses and neuroses of its author, to be diagnosed by the suitably equipped critic. However Feit Diehl goes further in her use of object-relations theory, claiming that it can illuminate our relationship, as readers, to texts: 'If we understand reading as a process of reparation, a revisionist procedure of re-making what we read, then analysis of that process of revision enables us more accurately to assess the distinctive psychic life of any individual reader.'[97] However this interpretation of a reader's function is also a severely limited one. Bloom has hinted at the importance of a theory of reading in any study of influence, and certainly a 'strong reader' does not read merely to assuage guilt feelings. Sylvia Plath has written eloquently on the subject:

> When I'm describing Henry James' use of metaphor to make emotional states vivid and concrete, I'm dying to be making up my own metaphors. When I hear a professor saying: 'yes, the wood is shady, but it's a *green* shade—connotations of sickness, death, etc.,' I feel like throwing up my books and writing my own bad poems and bad stories and living outside the neat, gray secondary air of the university. I don't like talking about D.H. Lawrence and about critics' views of him. I like reading him selfishly for an influence on my own life and my own writing.[98]

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[94] Bishop, 'Efforts of Affection,' p. 130
[95] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p.109
[96] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p.110
[97] Feit Diehl, *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore*, p.110
[98] Sylvia Plath, letter to Warren Plath, November 5, 1957, quoted in Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 118.

My criticism of these various psychoanalytical approaches to the idea of influence prompts the question: can a positive model for the examination of this process be found? In my view, no study which ignores the importance of external influences in order to construct a de-historicised theoretical model of the 'psychodynamics' of poetic self-fashioning can be successful. David Kalstone's book *Becoming a Poet* is a good example, as it can in many ways be seen as a vigorous riposte to overtheorised psychoanalytic studies like those of Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar, and Feit Diehl. Kalstone's study of Bishop stands out largely because of his skilful and balanced use of source material, which included letters, private papers and even verbal testimony. In this respect it is genuinely illuminating. He is particularly good on the Bishop/Moore relationship, recognising (as Feit Diehl doesn't) that the balance of power between the two women was far from one-sided. Moore often felt constrained, Kalstone argues, and admired Bishop's adventurousness and love of travel. He writes: 'almost from the start there was a useful tension between them that had to do with the ways the two women lived, the resemblances that triggered or accentuated differences.'[99] Kalstone is also very perceptive about the literary influence on Moore of her biological mother, 'Moore herself had insisted on the connections between the odd self-enclosed, self-nourishing speech of her family and the language of her poems...'[100] It is surprising that Feit Diehl largely overlooks this relationship, which one imagines would have been particularly pertinent to her argument. (Indeed Kalstone is referred to in Feit Diehl's study only by means of a single endnote, which, considering the scope of his study, is again surprising) A significant part of Kalstone's work lies in its recognition of the operation of serendipity and coincidence in the lives of Moore, Bishop, and Lowell. Of the Bishop/Lowell relationship he writes: 'the privileged nature of the early years of their friendship had almost as much to do with the moment of their encounter as it did with their considerable gifts'[101] and Kalstone also perceptively acknowledges the harmonious coincidences of the Moore/Bishop association:

> This is another reason why Marianne Moore's entrance into her life was

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[99] David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) p. 11
[100] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet,* p. 8
[101] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet,* p.132

> particularly important. While Bishop was commenting in poems and stories on her own sense of absence or half presence in the world, she was in fact involving herself with a poet who was all eye, all presence. Moore's secure bravado in dealing with the physical world was something Bishop instinctively valued, although she only gradually absorbed it into her writing. It was not simply the *fact* of her response to Moore, but the miraculous and instinctive timing of it that mattered.[102]

Attention to chance may seem a perilous emphasis for any study of a poet's work, but Kalstone is honest in his acceptance that particular historical, biographical circumstances often have a large part to play in the poet's development. Revisionism such as we have seen in the work of Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar, and Feit Diehl emphasises the primacy of the critical text over that of its object, the poem. This is achieved principally by an over-reliance on the notion of 'inevitability,' which psychoanalysis identifies as basic to human psychological development. But to apply this idea to the development of an artist is unhelpfully to reduce that process. Critics are not 'strong poets,' so a large part of their function must still be to illuminate the texts under their consideration. Kalstone's more practical and observant examination of the process of 'becoming a poet' is one approach. But what of writers who have never met or (perhaps) have never read each other's work? Bloom has asserted that it is possible to be influenced by a writer one has never read. The great superstructure of his theory of influence provides one reason why this might be so, but another, much simpler explanation is also possible.

In his introduction to *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard, whose theories of phenomenology and poetic identity I shall be using throughout the course of this thesis, clearly indicates that his ideas are in part a response to psychoanalytic interpretations of literature. These ideas amount to a theory of reading as much as a theory of poetic development. There are several important strands to Bachelard's argument. His work has much in common with Keats's practical advice about what he called 'negative capability' in poetry, when 'man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.[103] In similar fashion, Bachelard writes:

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[102] Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 22

[103] Letter from John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, December 21st 1817 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (fifth edition), ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), p. 863.

> one must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears: if there be a philosophy of poetry, it must appear and reappear through a significant verse, in total adherence to an isolated image; to be exact, in the very ecstasy of the newness of the image. The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche, the lesser psychological causes of which have not been sufficiently investigated. Nor can anything general and co-ordinated serve as a basis for a philosophy of poetry.'[104]

The whole scientific apparatus of psychoanalysis is regarded by Bachelard as irrelevant to the essential independence of the creative act. He regards the presentness of the poetic image as a mystery which cannot be explained away by psychological theorising about (to consider Bloom again) defensive swerving from an overwhelmingly powerful 'parent' poet. The 'salience' of the new poetic image is precisely what interests Bachelard, and he cannot regard it as having a merely psychological or unconscious cause:

> to say that the poetic image is independent of causality is to make rather a serious statement. But the causes cited by psychologists and psychoanalysts can never really explain the wholly unexpected nature of a new image... we can, of course, bear in mind psychoanalytical methods for determining the personality of the poet, and thus find a measure of the pressures—but above all of the oppressions—that a poet has been subjected to in the course of his life. But the poetic act itself, the sudden image, the flare-up of being in the imagination, are inaccessible to such investigations.[105]

In the course of my examination of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath, I shall attempt to show how a demonstrable context may have exerted pressure on their work. However my argument simultaneously maintains that their work remains in a basic sense irreducible to such pressures. Otherwise it simply would not exist. My analysis of the strikingly pervasive spatial metaphors in the work of all three writers takes its inspiration from Bachelard's theories about the importance of a concept of space for the formation and emergence of consciousness in poetry, but I go further in suggesting that such spaces may reflect precisely those external 'oppressions' of which the work itself represents an overcoming. It is nevertheless important to bear in mind both of these aspect of a text,

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[104] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* tr. Maria Jolas (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994) p. xv
[105] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* pp. xvii-xviii

its 'exterior' context and its 'interior' content, since they are parts of one whole. In this way I hope to avoid the de-historicising tendencies of a psychoanalytic or New Critical approach to the text, while giving poetic originality its due.

Bachelard's emphasis on the consciousness of the poet is an aid in this respect. If a poem cannot be explained away as a bundle of unconscious and involuntary impulses, then consciousness, with its implications of self-awareness and intentionality, becomes a key term in any consideration of poetic identity. Even so, Bachelard argues (again, like Keats) that the instinctive, the serendipitous, and the non-intentional *can* play a part in this scheme: 'in many instances we are obliged to acknowledge that poetry is a commitment of the soul. A consciousness associated with the soul is more relaxed, less intentionalised than a consciousness associated with the phenomena of the mind. Forces are manifested in poems that do not pass through the circuits of knowledge.'[106] Bachelard regards the emergence of the poetic image as fundamentally linked to the emergence of identity:

> it [i.e. the image] becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being ... Doctrines that are timidly causal, such as psychology, or strongly causal, such as psychoanalysis, can hardly determine the ontology of what is poetic. For nothing prepares a poetic image, especially not culture, in the literary sense, and especially not perception, in the psychological sense.
>
> I always come then to the same conclusion: the essential newness of the poetic image poses the problem of the speaking being's creativeness. Through this creativeness the imagining consciousness proves to be, very simply but very purely, an origin. In a study of the imagination, a phenomenology of the poetic imagination must concentrate on bringing out this quality of origin in various poetic images.[107]

In the course of my study of these writers, I will suggest that the ways in which they may have influenced each other were primarily to do with the historical and cultural moments in which they lived, and therefore in one sense express an historical inevitability. However, my analysis will also concern itself with the ways in which each writer can be shown to have emerged as an individual ('an origin'), and how their writings bear witness to the struggle of this poetic consciousness to be born. Dickinson,

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[106] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p.xxi
[107] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. xxiii-xxiv

H.D. and Plath are particularly relevant to a study of this kind because their work deals in a striking and perhaps unique way with the structure of consciousness as germane to the text. The emergence of this modern consciousness in their work cannot, as Bachelard suggests, be explained away by any closed theory of causality such as that of 'psychogenesis' in the sense of Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar, and Feit Diehl. My work therefore comprises a method of reading which allows for a certain openness of interpretation, and refuses, insofar as it is possible, to impose a systematic theory of psychological or biographical causality upon the poems. In my view, to do so would ironically represent a reinstatement of the kind of constraints each writer can be said to have attempted to overcome.

Bachelard recognises that the kind of phenomenological interpretation he is advocating cannot be an all-encompassing and generalised theory of poetry: 'there is even less hope of attaining to a synthetic phenomenology which would dominate an entire oeuvre, as certain psychoanalysts believe they can do.'[108] When Bachelard writes of 'sublimation', then, he means it in a separate sense from both the accepted psychoanalytic meaning of the word and from the Bloomian 'Sublime' which is really another form of absolute psychological/psychoanalytical sublimation. For Bachelard, sublimation has to do with the subject's coming-into-being by means of the poem: 'it no longer seems paradoxical that the speaking subject exists in his entirety in a poetic image, because unless he abandons himself to it without reservations, he does not enter into the poetic space of the image...the poetic image furnishes one of the simplest experiences of language that has been lived. And if, as I propose to do, it is considered as an origin of consciousness, it points to a phenomenology.'[109] Bachelard recognises that 'the necessity of separating a sublimation examined by a psychoanalyst from one examined by a phenomenologist of poetry is a necessity of method.' And such a method will entail 'tak[ing] the poetic image in its being'. Writing about the techniques of the psychologist or psychoanalyst he observes that they (and the critics who have adopted their method) 'readily go in for a simplex of superiority...images...have no significance for them—neither from the standpoint of the passions, nor from that of psychology or psychoanalysis. *It does not occur to them that the significance of such*

[108] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxv
[109] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxviii

images is precisely a poetic significance. But poetry is there with its countless surging images, images through which the creative imagination comes to live in its own domain.'[110] (my italics) The chapters which follow will examine the means by which consciousness emerges into the space of the text. Furthermore, the phenomenological method will also help to clarify what I will frequently term the 'utopian impulse' in the work of these three writers. Bachelard explains this by stating that on principle, phenomenology 'liquidates the past and confronts what is new...by the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future.'[111] As my next chapter shows, the strategies of Emily Dickinson's poetry achieve something uncannily close to this, while both H.D. and Plath similarly bear witness to the struggles of a consciousness constructing itself against the backdrop of unimaginable events in the first half of the twentieth century. The space which these writers inhabit is also, after all, the space of their own time.

[110] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. xxv, xxix
[111] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. xxxii-xxxiv

Chapter Two

'Poetry Torn Up By The Roots': The Dickinson Mythography and its Eighteen-Nineties Context.

An important part of my aim in this thesis is to provide a perspective on the cultural/historical context from which each poet emerged. The difficulties experienced by Dickinson, H.D., and Plath have much to do with their gender, which tended to lessen the number of options available to them as writers. Dickinson's refusal to publish has been subjected to many conflicting interpretations, but there is some evidence (not least from the poems themselves) that she preferred it that way, and not simply out of Puritan modesty. In the few tantalising letters Dickinson sent to her 'Preceptor' Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she shows herself to be acutely aware of her own idiosyncrasies and of the exegetical problems these posed for her (very few) readers:

> When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me -but a supposed person.[1]
>
> You say 'beyond your knowledge.' You would not jest with me, because I believe you - but preceptor - you cannot mean it? All men say 'what' to me, but I thought it a fashion -[2]
>
> Lest you meet my snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one - I had told you I did not print - I feared you might think me ostensible.[3]

The last extract above is a complaint about some editorial interference with her poem 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass'[4] (one of the few to be published in her lifetime) which purported to 'correct' her wayward punctuation. Interestingly, Dickinson seems to be linking the publication of her poem and the alteration of its lines to being thought 'ostensible' or deceptive, and she is anxious that Higginson not think of her in this way. Here she is almost apologising for the appearance of her poem, which is ironic, given Higginson's later heavy-handed interventions in his

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[1] *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 412. (Hereafter referred to as *Letters*)
[2] Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 415.
[3] Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 450.
[4] *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 459. (Hereafter referred to as *Complete Poems*)

capacity as her editor. There is evidence to suggest that Dickinson may have regarded Higginson, the urbane man of letters, as an ally against the defects in understanding exhibited by local editors. Yet she seems to have understood that there was no outlet for her work in its 'natural' state; that publication inevitably entailed unwanted interference. That she equates this with being 'robbed', with a kind of 'Larceny of time and mind'[5] is highly significant.

In the first part of this chapter I shall analyse some of the most important early reactions to the publication of Emily Dickinson's poems, as in my opinion this is one of the most plausible ways of considering her immediate literary context. The initial response to her poems can be seen in hindsight to practically vindicate her resolution never to publish. It is unlikely that she was unable to foresee the misunderstandings her poetry would have provoked. An analysis of these early reviews highlights with great clarity the difficulties Dickinson faced as a pioneering poet in her particular cultural situation. In my first chapter, I stated the importance of considering the cultural and historical context of each writer; hence my analysis will eventually lead to a consideration of what the poems *can be shown to say about themselves*, and the strategies of evasion and liberation they obsessively employ. This approach is aided by Gaston Bachelard's speculations in Chapter 9 of *The Poetics of Space*, 'The Dialectics of Outside and Inside.' In this chapter, Bachelard comments on the structural, 'geometrical' and philosophical hostility between the concepts of 'outside' and 'inside':

> Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative. Logicians draw circles that overlap or exclude each other, and all their rules immediately become clear. Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which—whether we will or no—confers spatiality upon thought...And so, simple geometrical opposition becomes tinged with aggressivity. Formal opposition is incapable of remaining calm. It is obsessed by the myth. But this action of the myth throughout the immense domain of imagination and expression should not be studied by attributing to it the false light of geometrical intuitions.[6]

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[5] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 519.

Bachelard is largely concerned with the imagination's capacity to transcend oppositional states, 'to determine being and, in so doing, transcend all situations, to give a situation of all situations.' The significance of the poetic images he examines is their radical freedom from prescribed oppositional categories, such as are found in psychoanalytic systems, or in the kind of geometrically-influenced metaphysics he describes above. Bachelard's intuition can usefully be applied to Dickinson's remarkable 'opposition' to the culture from which she was writing. That she was ahead of her time is a truism recognised by the various critics who have noted her affinities with the modernism of the early twentieth century. But my analysis moves from the 'outside' represented by her work's immediate critical milieu, to the 'inside' of the poems which, as I will demonstrate, subject exactly these outside/inside oppositions to excoriating scrutiny. In many ways, Dickinson's work can be shown to repeatedly collapse such false geometrical assumptions by radically re-imagining spatiality inside the poems. This originality is achieved by, as Bachelard terms it 'living the being of the image', it is fundamentally experiential, and leads to a consideration of Dickinson (as even Harold Bloom recognises) as a kind of pioneer in poetic language. So this chapter will move from a diagnosis of opposition to a recognition that this is precisely what Dickinson's writing often works to undo. As I begin by examining Dickinson's immediate critical environment, my main sources for the first part of this chapter are Klaus Lubber's comprehensive study of Dickinson's critical reception from 1891 to 1962 and the material provided by *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s: A Documentary History*, edited by Willis J. Buckingham.

The first volume of selected poems by Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was published on November 12, 1890, by Roberts Brothers of Boston. The book appeared in time for the Christmas market and was tastefully bound in a white cover which carried an embossed motif of an Indian Pipe, a native species reputed to be Emily Dickinson's favourite flower. Lubbers describes Dickinson's earliest publication history as an 'auction' and Buckingham concurs, noting that the publishers were also evidently aiming towards the marriage market and stating: 'The number of reviews Dickinson's book elicited, in their quantity alone, suggests that it received a push from shore of unusual

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[6] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* pp. 211-212.

firmness for a first volume by an unknown poet.'[7] The long history of 'creative editing' of Dickinson's work began here, as Lubbers notes; 49 of the 116 poems in this initial volume had been manipulated in some way. Most of the substantive editing aimed to correct Dickinson's idiosyncratic grammar and regularise her rhymes. Dickinson's variant words were omitted and in some cases entirely new words were substituted, while in 6 poems whole stanzas were omitted. One presumes that this too was to make Dickinson more immediately palatable to the current tastes of the literary marketplace. The initial print run of 500 copies (480 of which were for sale) sold out within a week. Several reprints followed, as well as a British edition which was published by the London publishers Osgood, McIlvaine in the summer of 1891. Curiosity about Dickinson's life was growing apace. Partly in response to this, and partly to whet the appetite of the magazine-reading public for more of Dickinson's work in advance of the publication of *Poems: Second Series,* which he and Mabel Loomis Todd had begun compiling early in 1891, Higginson published a selection of Emily Dickinson's letters to him in the *Atlantic Monthly* of October 1891, stating 'it has been urged upon me very strongly that her readers have the right to know something more of this gifted and most interesting woman.'[8] The second volume of Dickinson's selected poems (approximately one-third larger than the preceding volume) was eventually published on November 9 1891. Again, some rather heavy-handed editorial intervention had occurred, with 47 of the volume's 167 poems having been in this instance manipulated. The next major Dickinson publication dates from November 1894, with the publication of a two-volume edition of her letters, compiled and edited with some by Todd, and this was followed two years later by the third and final volume of her poetry in September 1896. Lubbers attests that the latter volume represented the 'zenith of 'creative editing''[9] with 89 interventions out of 168 poems. This was also the last Dickinson publication of the century. Enough material remained for a number of further volumes but because of her bitter legal wrangle with Lavinia Dickinson and the accompanying implications

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[7] Introduction, *Emily Dickinson's Critical Reception in the 1890s: a Documentary History*, ed. Willis J. Buckingham. (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Pittsburgh University Press 1989). p.xii

[8] Thomas Wentworth Higginson: 'Emily Dickinson's Letters.' Atlantic Monthly 68 (October 1891) In *Critical Reception*, p.182 [no. 221]

[9] Klaus Lubbers: *Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution.* (Ann Arbor, 1968) p. 71

for copyright, Mabel Loomis Todd retired from the editing and publishing of Emily Dickinson's work, and the next publication would not occur until 1914.

As may be inferred from the history summarised above, interest in Dickinson was immediate and vehement. A way was paved for prospective readers of Dickinson by Higginson, (Dickinson's posthumous impresario in the way that Pound was H.D.'s and Hughes was Plath's) who published an introductory essay about her entitled 'An Open Portfolio' in the *Christian Union* in September of 1890. In the course of this essay fourteen of her poems are quoted in full. The essay also contains the earliest published characterisation of Dickinson and was to prove widely influential as a reference point for critics and reviewers in the decade to come. Higginson begins by comparing Dickinson's work to Emerson's 'Poetry of the Portfolio,' the work 'of persons who wrote for the relief of their own minds and without thought of publication.'[10] Such work, Higginson claims, 'will have at least the merit of perfect freedom; accompanied, of course, by whatever drawback follows by the habitual absence of criticism.'[11] It is here that the notion of Dickinson's lack of finish, her 'roughness' first appears. Higginson evidently assumed that it was necessary first to prepare the audience for the debut of such a radically different voice, even given the textual alterations of the poems which are published here. A poem which Higginson rather lamely entitles 'By the Sea' , which is the first example he quotes, warrants comparison with its later appearance in Johnson's edition (#619):

By The Sea

Glee! the great storm is over!
Four have recovered the land;
Forty gone down together
Into the boiling sand.

Ring! for the scant salvation!
Toll! for the bonnie souls,
Neighbour and friend and bridegroom,
Spinning upon the shoals.

How they will tell the shipwreck
When winter shakes the door,

619

Glee - The great storm is over -
Four - have recovered the land -
Forty - gone down together -
Into the boiling Sand -

Ring - for the scant salvation -
Toll - for the bonnie Souls -
Neighbour - and friend -
and Bridegroom -
Spinning upon the Shoals -

How they will tell the Story -

[10]Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p.3
[11] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, pp. 3-4

Till the children ask, 'But the forty?
Did they come back no more?'

Then a silence suffuses the story
And a softness the teller's eye,
And the children no further question;
And only the waves reply.

When Winter shake the Door -
Till the Children urge -
But the Forty -
Did they - come back no more?

Then a softness - suffuse the
Story -
And a silence - the Teller's eye -
And the Children - no further
question -
And only the Sea - reply -

The alterations which have been made to this poem are representative of most of Higginson's and Todd's interventions. The most obvious omission is of the dashes. One of the effects their inclusion would have preserved is the idea (so common in Dickinson) of the mysterious and absolute separation of the living and the dead. The dashes can be seen as a mimetic representation of this breach on the level of the text, as well as adequately conveying an effect of breath (or breathlessness). The inclusion of more conventional punctuation contributes significantly to the overall flatness of the Higginson version. The weight which Dickinson gives to her words by means of the old-fashioned capitalisation has been erased—here Dickinson's nouns are like any other nouns. The use of inverted commas, too, seems fussy (a quarter of a century later Joyce considered them too 'perverted' even for prose). But the most crucial changes occur in the last stanza, where 'softness' and 'silence' are exchanged, and 'waves' takes the place of 'Sea.' Presumably the editors balked at the illogical idea of a silent eye. This weird metonymy now strikes us as classic Dickinson, one of the ways in which she achieves her strongest effects; but here it has been smoothed over and, like the aptly inconclusive final line in 'Glee - The great storm is over -', 'conventionalised' beyond recognition.

In this essay Higginson, by invoking Emerson, is at pains to stress the authenticity of a poetry written without thought of publication. This simple and naïve quality is present in his description of Dickinson as 'a woman so secluded that she lived literally indoors by choice for many years, and within the limits of her father's estate for many more— who shrank even from the tranquil society of a New England college town, and yet loved her few friends with profound devotedness, and divided

her life between them and her flowers.'[12] He professes to be startled, *given the limitations of the life*, that the poetry should be so vivid. Again, it is possible to see, by means of Higginson's condescending if well-meaning comments, the point at which the notion of Dickinson as a figure worthy of pity, and thus as in many ways a defective artist, is first placed on the record: 'the unutterable dignity of death seems to have forced itself again and again upon this lonely woman,' he comments, although this is counterbalanced somewhat by references to her 'terse strength' and 'superb concentration.' Emphasising the private nature of her work, he asserts that 'it is with some misgiving, and almost with a sense of questionable publicity, that it has at last been decided by her surviving sister and her friends to print a small selection from these poems.'[13] Ignoring the many poems by Dickinson which have to do with ambition, achievement and fame, Higginson ends his article by printing 'This is my letter to the world' (J.441) in its entirety, remarking that it was 'probably the utterance of a passing mood only' and contains the 'only hint' of her consciousness that she might one day have a wider audience.[14]

Higginson's advocacy of Dickinson continued in the widely-quoted 'Preface' to *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (November 12, 1890). He reiterates his comparison of Dickinson's work to Emerson's portfolio poetry, and attaches a character sketch which deserves full quotation, contributing as it did to the spread of the Dickinson myth:

> It was [Edward Dickinson's] custom to hold a large reception at his house, attended by all the families connected with the institution[15] and by the leading people of the town. On these occasions his daughter Emily emerged from her wonted retirement and did her part as gracious hostess; nor would anyone have known from her manner, I have been told, that this was not a daily occurrence. The annual occasion once past, she withdrew again into her seclusion, and except for a very few friends was as invisible to the world as if she had dwelt in a nunnery. For myself, although I had corresponded with her for many years, I saw her but twice face to face, and brought away the impression of something as unique or remote as Undine or Mignon or Thekla.[16]

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[12] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* p. 4
[13] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* p. 9
[14] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* p. 9
[15] Amherst College, of which Edward Dickinson was treasurer.
[16] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* p. 14

His comparison of Dickinson with these fictional characters is telling. It simultaneously demonstrates his bemusement at her unknowability and his awareness that this very mysteriousness could prove an asset in the promotion of her work. In the concluding paragraph of the Preface he continues his qualified and semi-apologetic praise of her poems and his portrayal of her as a New England primitivist: 'in many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed.'[17] Significantly, the poems which hint at severe mental conflict are seen as signs of her 'vivid imagination.'[18] Higginson is too gallant to state publicly his opinion (voiced elsewhere) that Dickinson was 'partially cracked,' but it is also singularly inappropriate in this context to suggest that the poems represent signs of serious derangement. It would presumably have provoked protests from the estate as well as casting the motivation of the editors in an even more questionable light. Mental instability is the domain of bohemian types like Poe, not of New England nuns.

Higginson's next significant Dickinson publication occurred in the *Atlantic Monthly* of October 1891. The article 'Emily Dickinson's Letters' was again a kind of appetiser for an apparently insatiably curious audience. Millicent Todd Bingham thought it 'well timed to arouse interest in the forthcoming Second Series of *Poems*' and Buckingham remarks that 'no other publication event gave Dickinson wider exposure in the nineties.'[19] Following what he calls 'a suddenness of success almost without a parallel in American literature' Higginson accedes to the demands of Dickinson's public for biographical data, stating 'no other letters bring us quite so intimately near to the peculiar quality and aroma of her nature...it has been urged upon me very strongly that her readers have the right to know something more of

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[17] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 14 This comment of Higginson's on Dickinson's stylistic peculiarity echoes, with uncanny similarity, Ted Hughes's description of Sylvia Plath's idiosyncrasies, made almost exactly a century later: 'Though her whole considerable ambition was fixed on becoming the normal flowering and fruiting kind of writer, *her work was roots only*. Almost as if her entire oeuvre were enclosed within those processes and transformations that happen in other poets before they can even begin, before the muse can hold out a leaf.' [my italics] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*: *Occasional Prose,* ed. William Scammell (London, Faber and Faber, 1995) p. 178. See my commentary on Hughes's use of spatial metaphor to describe Plath's development in Chapter 4, pp. 211-217.

[18] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 14

[19] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* (note to no. 221) p. 182

this gifted and most interesting woman.'[20] Higginson is at pains to make clear that his recognition of Dickinson was immediate: 'the impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after thirty years of further knowledge' yet admitting 'even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered.'[21] In fact, as Sewall points out, after having received Dickinson's curious communication in 1862 : 'all he did, besides sending Emily a letter of cautious praise sometime during the next six weeks, was to exclaim to the *Atlantic* editor, James T. Fields, the day after he got Emily's first letter: 'I foresee that 'young contributors' will send me worse things than ever now. Two such specimens of verse as came yesterday & day before— fortunately *not* to be forwarded for publication!''[22] He emphasises Dickinson's personal and professional evasiveness, calling it 'a naïve skill such as the most experienced and worldly coquette might envy.'[23] 'Naïve skill' is a rather oxymoronic idea, and this passage shows that Higginson is gallantly and patronisingly absolving Dickinson of any great calculation in her correspondence with him. (This is an idea which the letters quoted tend to dispel, however). Higginson describes Dickinson's handwriting—like everything else about her, it seems—as 'so peculiar that it seems as if the writer might have taken her first lessons by studying the famous fossil bird-tracks in the museum of that college town' and continues (in what is probably a veiled riposte to one of Dickinson's fiercest early critics, Andrew Lang, whose reviews are discussed below), 'yet it was not in the slightest degree illiterate, but cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique.'[24] Dickinson's letter of July 1862 is quoted, and it gives the lie to Higginson's portrait of her as naïve and childlike, although Dickinson's metaphorical technique is in itself a kind of tease:

> Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince than die. Men do not call the surgeon to commend the bone, but to set it, sir, and fracture within is more critical. And for this, preceptor, I shall bring you obedience, the blossom from my garden, and every gratitude I know.
>
> Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that. My business is

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[20] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 183
[21] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 184
[22] Richard Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974; London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 544
[23] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 184
[24] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception.*, p. 183

circumference.[25]

Despite the respectful tone, the authoritative note in this is unmistakable. Nevertheless Higginson continues to portray Dickinson as 'naïve' and uncultivated: 'It would seem that at first I tried a little,— a very little— to lead her in the direction of rules and traditions; but I fear it was only perfunctory, and that she interested me more in her— so to speak— unregenerate condition.'[26] The emphasis is again on his *discovery* of this rare native flower. Later in the article Higginson admits that he is aware of Dickinson's tactics: 'she always persistently keeping up this attitude of 'Scholar,' and assuming on my part a preceptorship which it is almost needless to say did not exist' but this does not in turn lead him to regard Dickinson as an intellectual equal (her letters to him, despite the childish posing, display remarkable self-assurance). Instead he thinks of her as unteachable: 'I soon abandoned all attempt to guide in the slightest degree this extraordinary nature, and simply accepted her confidences, giving as much as I could of what might interest her in return.'[27] Higginson's description of his first visit to Dickinson follows, and in its bemused but fascinated detachment, became the standard and most lasting first-hand portrait of Dickinson that has come down to us. Again the emphasis is on her quaint and childlike behaviour. It is difficult to square this portrait of Dickinson (then forty) with, say, the mature character who emerges from her subsequent correspondence with Judge Otis Lord. One suspects that Dickinson may have been performing slightly:

> After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, 'like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass,' and with the smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order, whose prescribed garb was white pique, with a blue net worsted shawl. She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, 'these are my introduction,' and adding, also under her breath, in childlike fashion, 'forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say.' But soon she began to talk,

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[25] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception,* p. 188
[26] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception,* p. 188
[27] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception,* p. 191

and thenceforward continued almost constantly.[28]

It is very easy to accept Higginson's description and estimation of Dickinson at face value, without recognising the double or triple refraction resulting from his paternalistic, half-pitying perception, his reconstruction of the earlier event, and our acute sense of historical irony that, as Sewall puts it 'a man so prominent in his time— abolitionist, reformer, preacher, army officer, litterateur with a bibliography of some five hundred items— should now be known principally as the friend and editor of Emily Dickinson.'[29] This portrait of Dickinson fed the mounting biographical frenzy surrounding the poet in the 1890s and was in many ways responsible for the persistent image of Dickinson, pounced on by Lang, among others, as quaint, fey and irremediably lightweight. Dickinson is compared to a child no less than three times in the passage above, which contrasts very interestingly— or perhaps is an additional symptom of— what Higginson later describes as her 'wantonness of overstatement.'[30] Higginson is also the source of the idea that Dickinson was the victim of a joyless and domineering father (this was the same man who was capable, as Sewall and Perry Miller both record, of summoning the townsfolk of Amherst to witness a particularly beautiful display of northern lights by ringing the church bell). In a letter to his wife, Higginson had described Edward Dickinson as 'thin dry & speechless— I saw what her life has been'[31] In the *Atlantic* essay Dickinson's father is described as

> a man of the old type, *la vieille roche* of Puritanism— a man who, as she said, read on Sunday 'lonely and rigorous books;' and who had from childhood inspired her with such awe, that she never learned to tell time by the clock till she was fifteen, simply because he had tried to explain it to her when she was a little child, and she had been afraid to tell him that she did not understand, and also afraid to ask anyone else lest he should hear it.[32]

This is a portrait at variance with Dickinson's letter to Higginson following her father's death (and which is later quoted by him):

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[28] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception,* p. 193
[29] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, p. 573
[30] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception* , p. 194
[31] Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 475 [342b]

> The last Afternoon that my Father lived, though with no premonition - I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for Mother, Vinnie being asleep. He seemed peculiarly pleased as I oftenest stayed with myself, and remarked as the Afternoon withdrew, he 'would like it not to end.'
>
> His pleasure almost embarrassed me and my Brother coming - I suggested they walk. Next morning I woke him for the train - and saw him no more.
>
> His heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists.[33]

The point is that the characterisation offered by Higginson in his *Atlantic* essay is necessarily biased and selective and is probably designed to increase the mystery of Dickinson's character and situation, rather than to demystify it. There is also, perhaps, a failure to understand properly the Puritan culture of which Dickinson was a part. Higginson tends to promote the outsider's view of it at inherently life-denying and forbidding. There is also evidence to show that he—probably inadvertently—started the idea of Dickinson as inadequately educated and poorly read: 'He [Edward Dickinson] did not wish his children, when little, to read anything but the Bible; and when, one day, her brother brought her home Longfellow's *Kavanagh*, he put it secretly over the pianoforte cover, made signs to her, and they both afterwards read it.' He continues:

> After the first book she thought in ecstasy, 'this, then, is a book, and there are more of them.' But she did not find so many as she expected, for she afterwards said to me, 'when I lost the use of my eyes, it was a comfort to think there were so few real books that I could easily find one to read me all of them.' Afterwards, when she regained her eyes, she read Shakespeare, and thought to herself 'Why is any other book needed?'[34]

Apart from the fact that this passage gives the misleading impression that Dickinson read Shakespeare for the first time only after her eye treatment, Dickinson's overstated discernment is downplayed once more in order to highlight her quaintness. The result is a rather disastrous portrait— which became standard—of Dickinson as an *idiot savant*. Towards the end of the sketch, Higginson *does* emphasize that he was witness only to Dickinson's '*exaltée* side.' 'I had no opportunity to see that human and humorous side of her which is strongly

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[32] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 193
[33] Dickinson, *Letters*, p 528

emphasized by her nearer friends,'[35] but the portrait given by him in this article was most lasting. Dickinson's public *required* her to be outré, and the nineties were a period of literary fads. Higginson was simultaneously catering for and creating a demand. In Dickinson's case, it was easy and in many ways natural for Higginson to downplay the artistic control, the intelligence, and ultimately the indicators of artistic intentionality that she displayed. But this thesis will argue that it is precisely because Dickinson situates her poetry at the point where 'expression creates being'[36] that her intentions and strategies can be viewed as radically original. It is important to emphasize, however, that her 'intentional' strategies are operating on the level of the text. With Emily Dickinson, H.D. and Plath, biographical speculation inevitably influences that interpretation of the work, sometimes in an illuminating way, sometimes (as here or in the case of much Plath criticism) to misleading effect. The aim of this thesis is in part to highlight the evidence for conscious self-construction employed by these writers, the traces of intentionality borne out by the texts, in order to bypass the limited and limiting effects of simple *ad hominem* or psychoanalytic criticism.[37]

Apart from her editors, Dickinson's principal advocate in these earliest notices was the well-known critic William Dean Howells, whose review of Dickinson's Poems, 'Editor's Study', appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in January 1891. Buckingham confirms that Howell's review was 'widely influential during the first year of the poet's reception.'[38] Howells' essay surpasses much of Higginson's writing in its sensitivity, and for the first time it is suggested that Dickinson's famed withdrawal was not altogether inexplicable, given her situation: 'There is no hint of what turned her life in upon itself, and probably this was its natural evolution, or involution, from tendencies inherent in the New England, or the Puritan, spirit.'[39] Moreover, it could be inferred from the following passage that Howells seems aware of the possible damage to her literary reputation that stories of her great eccentricity might induce: 'We are told that once a year she met the local world at a reception in her father's house; *we do not know that there is any harm in*

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[34] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 193
[35] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 194
[36] Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, p. xxiii
[37] I discuss the New Critical bugbear of 'The Intentional Fallacy' in some detail below, pp. 71-79.
[38] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 74 [no. 64]

adding, that she did not always literally meet it, but sometimes sat with her face averted in another room.' [italics mine] Howells is also most fair in acknowledging that Dickinson's work and working methods display a high degree of design:

> it was evident that she wished her poetry finally to meet the eyes of that world which she had herself always shrunk from. She could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity, its singular worth; and no doubt it was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life.[40]

Despite the descriptive embroidery which suggests Dickinson was partly benighted—a suggestion she herself makes in one of her letters to Higginson[41]— Howells' emphasis on the positive aspects of Dickinson's poetry, and of its status in her life is unqualified and unapologetic. For Howells, reading her work does not constitute an almost improper intrusion on Dickinson's privacy, because the poems are strong enough to withstand exacting scrutiny. Howells also compares Dickinson to Emerson, or rather, following Higginson's suggestion, to 'a Blake who had read Emerson who had read Blake.'[42] He is simultaneously careful to stress her uniqueness and seeming lack of influence: 'one is ready to declare that the utterance of this most singular and authentic spirit would have been the same if there had never been an Emerson or Blake in the world.' Most crucially, what for most of her readers (not least her editors) is a rebarbative roughness is understood by Howells:

> There is apparent to reflection the fact that the artist meant just this harsh exterior to remain, and that no grace of smoothness could have imparted her intention as it does. It is the soul of an abrupt, exalted New England woman that speaks in such brokenness.[43]

Howell's review ends by making a remarkable statement about Dickinson's contribution:

> If nothing else had come out of our life but this strange poetry we should

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[39] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 74
[40] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 74
[41] Letter of July 1862, quoted by Higginson: 'You spoke of Pippa Passes. I never heard anybody speak of Pippa Passes before. You see my posture is benighted.' 'Pippa Passes' was the first in the series in Browning's 'Bells and Pomegranates' (1841) Letter quoted in Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 188
[42] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 74
[43] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 77

> feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it; and the interesting and important thing is that this poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionarism.[44]

For Howells, Dickinson's importance lies in the fact that she is representative of New England Puritan culture, which in turn is representative of America. His excited approval of her unique and native quality is rare at this period, when most of the 'genteel critics' looked towards England and Europe for standards of literary excellence. Howells' is the first and clearest statement of Emily Dickinson's national and world importance as a writer, and included in his view is the notion that Dickinson was a writer fully in control of her materials, whose style was a matter of choice rather than ignorance or naïveté. Moreover Howells is ahead of his time in claiming an equal status for poetry as a reflector of society at large. His comments were to find an echo in the movement of early modernism two decades later. That he envisages Emily Dickinson's work as part of this enterprise is highly significant at this stage.

However to adopt Howells' critical stance as representative would be misleading. While there was widespread curiosity and popular enthusiasm about her, Dickinson's work was for the most part ill-received by the literary mandarins of the day. Initially the more 'high-brow' critics maintained a disdainful silence. A prominent early detractor was Andrew Lang, whom Lubbers describes as a 'learned Scotsman, anthropologist, classicist, historian, journalist, novelist, and dabbler in poetry.'[45] Lang was a lively and prolific critic for the *Daily News* and well-known both in Britain and in the United States. Buckingham confirms that Lang had a critical axe to grind with Higginson and more particularly with Howells, continuing : 'this piece reveals that its author was acquainted with Dickinson only insofar as he had read Howells's review of her in the current *Harper's*.'[46] In his discussion of Lang's response, Lubbers emphasises Lang's 'anger' at Dickinson's irregularities, but this is to overstate the case, as the immoderate tone of the review seems frequently to exceed its subject, hinting that the source of Lang's annoyance lies

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[44] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 78
[45] Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 36
[46] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 80 [note to no. 72]

elsewhere. His first significant attack occurred in the London *Daily News* on January 2 1891, in an article entitled 'The Newest Poet.' (This title was in itself a jibe at New World literary crazes). Lang takes issue with Howells's comments about Dickinson's contribution immediately: 'Mr. Howells is a critic not always easy to please, and the world cannot but be interested in hearing what the strains of the Tenth Muse are like.'[47] Lang's response to the first stanza of 'I taste a liquor never brewed', quoted by Howells and compared by him to Heine, is scoffing:

> 'Alcohol' does not rhyme to pearl, but Miss Dickinson is not to be regarded as responsible for mere rhymes. Nor for grammar! It is literally impossible to understand whether she means that she tastes a liquor never brewed at all, or a liquor never brewed 'from' tankards scooped in pearl. By 'from' she may mean 'in.' Let us give her the benefit of the doubt, and she still writes utter nonsense. It is clearly impossible to scoop a tankard from pearl. The material is inadequate.[48]

Lubbers charges Lang with 'responding only with his intellect'[49] but even this is an exoneration of sorts. Lang's misreading has an element of wilfulness about it. His classical training runs aground on the indeterminacy of the first two lines of the poem and his blinkered literal-mindedness of approach show that his hostility to Dickinson is unfortunately inevitable. (And he ironically falls victim to the same vagueness he attributes to Dickinson with his reference to inadequate material. Is he referring to the tankards or the material of the poetry?) On reading a critic like Lang, one wonders whether the half-way house of Todd's and Higginson's editing did Dickinson more harm than good. What would have been the response if Dickinson's work had stood before Lang in its unaltered 'unregenerate' state? It is significant that Lang seems to be responding in part to the prevailing idea (for which Higginson, as we have seen, was in no small part responsible) of Dickinson as an *idiot savant*. Lang has no hesitation in apportioning blame where he thinks it deserved:

> Of course the idea occurs that Mr. Howells is only bantering, that he cannot really mean to praise this farrago of illiterate and uneducated sentiment...and Mr. Howells solemnly avers that this drivel is characteristic of American life! ... there is a good deal of harm in praising as excellent and typical poetry, the trash which every editor of a magazine receives in bales. If poetry exists it is

[47] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 81
[48] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 81
[49] Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 37

> by virtue of original, or at least of agreeable thought, musically and magically expressed. Poetry has been defined as 'the best thought in the best words.'...It is, in itself, a touching thought that a lady of extremely solitary habits should have solaced herself by writing a kind of verses [*sic*]; but to proclaim that such verses as we have quoted are poetry, and good poetry, is to be guilty of 'the pathetic fallacy' in an original manner, and is to encourage many impossible poets.[50]

'Musically and magically expressed' means, baldly, poetry which displays regular scansion and exact rhymes. Lang, who would presumably have been hostile to any poetry which did not bear the imprimatur of classical norms, is especially hostile to the assumptions behind Howells' claim that Emily Dickinson is a representative American poet. Because 'the Newest Poetry from New England,' (as it is sarcastically termed), is the product of 'a lady of extremely solitary habits' it is by definition without merit. The implicit gender-bias in this passage obtrudes, and it is developed with still greater clarity in Lang's subsequent interventions in the Dickinson debate. It is here in Lang's misplaced use of the 'pathetic fallacy'— the implication being that a reclusive woman is no more capable of powerful expression than is an inanimate object. But for the most part the focus of Lang's ire is not Dickinson (whom he has already all but dismissed as unworthy of his attention) but Howells and America.

The social and gender prejudices with which Andrew Lang approaches his task as reviewer are evident in the article 'A Literary Causerie' which he published in *The Speaker* later in the same month: 'Aristotle says that the ultimate Democracy is remarkable for the licence it permits to women and to children. Miss Dickinson, like Mrs. Browning, though she was not learned like Mrs. Browning, took great licence with rhymes. Possibly the poetry of Democracy will abound more and more with these liberties. But then the question will arise, Is it poetry at all?'[51] This is chilling, as is Lang's subsequent dismissive and painfully literal-minded reading of Dickinson's 'I died for Beauty' in the same article. Lang also asserts that 'lawless poetry' by which he again means poetry without rhyme and measured feet, 'has no right to exist.' He is also assuming, with little evidence, that Dickinson was unlearned, as he has previously considered her 'illiterate.'[52]

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[50]Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, pp. 82-83
[51] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 108
[52] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 82

In 'Some American Poets' which was published in the *Illustrated London News* (also published in New York) in March 1891, Lang dilates on the democratic theme. Noting that Dickinson's *Poems* has 'already reached its fourth edition, partly, no doubt, because Mr. Howells praised it very highly,' he continues: 'even if Democracy overleaps itself and lands in savagery again, I believe that our savage successors will, though unconsciously, make their poems grammatical. Savages do not use bad grammar in their own conversation or in their artless compositions. That is a fault of defective civilisations.'[53] By this analysis, Dickinson is worse than a 'savage' —the imperialist hauteur is strongly in evidence— she is the mouthpiece of a 'defective Civilization.' If Higginson misunderstood Dickinson's culture and underestimated her artistic intentions, Lang's attitude can only be described as one of blind incomprehension. He is unprepared to countenance American poetry which is not written in a traditional European style sanctioned by what he calls 'the wisdom of the ages and the nature of man.' Therefore the work of established New England poet and critic, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, is approved of heartily by Lang in the same review: 'this is as pretty as if Paulus Silentiarius had written it— Paulus, that pleasing decadent of thirteen centuries ago. I am happy in having seen 'A Petition' well done into Greek elegiacs.'[54] Aldrich's poetry meets Lang's approval because it withstands an appeal to authority. Its outward form is comprehensible when set against the tradition of the great men of the western canon (as it then stood). Aldrich is, moreover, a man of some social stature and reputation, as Lang recognises: 'the brief poem to the Laureate is admirable, a charming compliment.'[55] Approving thus of the 'pretty' poetry of social gesture, Lang's hostility to Dickinson is understandable. The kind of psychological probing and consequent linguistic fractures which Dickinson's work displays are simply not recognised by Lang as poetry. It was as if Dickinson had invented a new language, which necessitated an answering revolution in the language of criticism.

The next and last significant intervention by Lang into the Dickinson debate occurred in the *London Daily News* on October 3, 1891. The anonymous article 'An American Sappho' is widely though to have been the work of Lang, although

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[53] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 122
[54] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 123
[55] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 123

Lubbers does not make this attribution, merely calling the author Dickinson's 'unknown last British foe.'[56] However, Mabel Loomis Todd herself seems to have recognised Lang behind the piece, and Buckingham supports this view: 'If Mrs. Todd meant to suggest that the later *Daily News* review for that date [i.e. 3 /10/ 91] was sufficiently alike in tone and interests to implicate a pen held by the same hand, her observation is amply justified.'[57] In this article, Lang makes use of the material Higginson had published in 'Emily Dickinson's Letters.' Crucially, we see Higginson's portrayal of Dickinson as childlike and *sui generis* being turned against both 'Scholar' and 'Preceptor':

> She told him that her eyes were like heel-taps, 'like the sherry in the glass, that the guest leaves.' *La fille aux yeux d'or*, in fact. Miss Dickinson's ankle 'panted,' in a later composition; ankles in real life 'will not do so,' but Mr. Higginson 'thought it all very capital.' The critic did, indeed, try to make his pupil write a little less like a born idiot, 'but I fear she interested me more in her—so to speak—unregenerate condition.'[58]

There is an implicit mockery of Higginson's misplaced gallantry in this passage, a hint that his interest in Dickinson's panting ankle might have blunted his critical perception. This is standard for Lang, and most of the deprecatory comments in the rest of the article contain an obvious gender-bias. Higginson's description of Dickinson's taste in reading is put to unfortunate use:

> ...was little read in books, and here, perhaps, is the simple secret of her oddity, and of her charm for those whom she has charmed. She could make a pudding, though she had little sympathy with the luxurious taste which calls for such dainties. To read poetry 'made her feel as if the roof of her head was taken off.' It is easy to see the interest of a character like this, but it is really next to impossible to see the merit of poetry like Miss Dickinson's.[59]

Again, Lang appeals to authoritative and 'objective' standards: 'Poetry is a thing of many laws— felt and understood, and sanctioned by the whole experience of humanity, rather than written. Miss Dickinson in her poetry broke every one of the

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[56] Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 40
[57] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 81
[58] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 203
[59] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, pp. 203-204

natural and salutary laws of verse. Hers is the very anarchy of the Muses...'[60] By 'the whole experience of humanity' Lang makes an appeal to a mystifying generality, the reality of which consisted of a classically educated and socially privileged elite. Even his earlier reference to 'savages' is a recognisable part of this world-view. Grammar is not only an apt ornament of verse, it also carries social and ethical import. Innocent savages know as much, but the corruption of such standards indicates a 'defective civilisation.' It is interesting to note that Lang is here using Higginson's critical strategies for a contrary purpose. By portraying Dickinson as 'unregenerate,' a kind of noble savage in her own right, it would seem Higginson hoped to excuse her imperfections, the unadorned face of her poetry 'without a single good feature.'[61] The editorial 'improvements' were a part of this strategy. For Lang, Dickinson's supporters (primarily Howells and Higginson) are guilty of an appalling lapse of taste all too characteristic of their society. But what is most interesting is that Lang begins to hint that Dickinson's work is dangerous: 'Unless all poets, from the earliest improvisers to the Laureate, have been wrong in their methods, Miss Dickinson cannot possibly have been right in hers...it is much to be wished that her admirers do not become her imitators, defying grammar, rhyme, sense, and prosody.'[62] Lang deplores the widespread popular enthusiasm for Dickinson's verse but it is the fact that she has been given sponsorship and sanction by educated men who should know better which arouses his greatest ire. Interestingly, his article ends by restating his disapproval of this immodesty in gender-inflected terms: 'Critics who are asked to be candid about such effusions will be wise if they bid the writers 'drop the paste and think themselves a fool,' as Miss Dickinson puts it, for coming to the festival of the muses in such scandalous lack of a wedding garment.'[63] The social implications adumbrated by the kind of criticism which claims that subversive types like Dickinson 'no right to exist'[64] are rather unsettling. And it is Lang himself who repeatedly refers to the possible social implications of this poetry: 'perhaps in this

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[60] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 204

[61] Higginson describes Dickinson thus: 'a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, "like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass," [*sic.*], and with the smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair.' In Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 193

[62] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 204

[63] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 204

[64] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 108 Lang writes: 'one must urge that lawless poetry is skimble-skamble stuff, with no right to exist.'

anarchy lies the charm which has made her popular in America, and has caused Mr. Howells to say that she alone would serve to justify American literary existence. Fortunately that continent has a much more valid *raison d'etre*.' Lang does not elaborate on America's *raison d'etre*, but one might surmise he refers to the other factors mentioned by Howells: 'our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, our millionarism.'[65] Lang's is the voice of the erstwhile imperialist; half-condescending, half-threatened. That Dickinson should have evoked such a response shows her even at this stage to be more representative of her society than was immediately recognised. The widespread and remarkable popular enthusiasm for her work indicates that even despite editorial intervention and biographical misrepresentation, her work possessed a peculiar attraction. And such inferences can be made from the most energetic negative evaluations of her work also. What is significant is the degree to which interest has shifted from the work itself to what the work—and more particularly the person— of Dickinson has come to represent for her reviewers. Again, the parallels with Plath's case are striking. Ironically, Lang himself recognises the dangers of biographical fetishism: 'probably neither the matter nor the manner is all that attracts Miss Dickinson's admirers, but a sense of the curious, passionate and thwarted character of the writer, behind the verse, if we can call it verse.'[66] But the extent to which he was influenced by preconceptions about Dickinson and her supporters is clear.

The final 'representative' critic whose opinions on Dickinson I shall briefly examine was the poet approved of so strongly by Andrew Lang, Thomas Bailey Aldrich. He was a man who commanded a considerable amount of respect in New England literary circles: 'reputed to be one of the great successors of the New England patriarchs, equally honoured as a writer of prose, poetry, and criticism, he had passed as the touchstone of good taste during his editorship of the Atlantic (1880-90). As a poet and aesthete he represented a rigid formalism.'[67] His contribution to opinion on Dickinson consisted of an essay, '*In Re* Emily Dickinson,' which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1892. The essay was partially and fully reproduced in subsequent years and as Buckingham states: 'became the best-

[65] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 78
[66] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 204
[67] Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 57

known— and perhaps most influential— rejection of Dickinson's poetry to appear in the 1890s.'[68] Aldrich opens by describing Dickinson's work as a 'poetical chaos' and attempting some personal editorialising of the poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed': 'I have ventured to desecrate this stanza by tossing a rhyme into it, as the other stanzas happened to rhyme, and here print the lyric, hoping the reader will not accuse me of overvaluing it:'

I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine;
No tankard ever held a draught
Of alcohol like mine.[69]

[From tankards scooped in pearl
[Not all the vats upon the Rhine
[Yield such an alcohol

To lavish his own considerable literary abilities on the poem may, presumably, be seen as an overvaluation of it. The fact that he attempts this is nonetheless significant. This kind of 'improving' on the matter is part of Aldrich's paternalistic attitude. As with Lang, many of his critical points are gender-inflected (that he has been influenced by biographical speculation about Dickinson is clear): 'several of the quatrains are curiously touching, they have such a pathetic air of yearning to be poems...the very way she tied her bonnet-strings, preparatory to one of her nunlike walks in her claustral garden, must have been Emersonian...whenever a woman poet is in question Mr. Higginson always puts on his rose-colored spectacles.'[70] It is to Higginson that Aldrich owed his description of Dickinson as 'nunlike.' The 'yearning' quality of her verse (the same *sehnsucht* which Lang identified as a sentimental and rather meretricious quality of her work) is probably also the product of Higginson's biographical speculations abut Dickinson's pitiable and unfulfilled life. For Aldrich (as for Lang) the kind of person Dickinson apparently was cannot be capable of producing quality poetry: 'an eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar.'[71] The real basis of Aldrich's inability to read Dickinson is explained by Lubbers: 'his anonymous essay...would have had the same significance if the author had retitled it '*In Re* Thomas B.

[68]Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 282 [note to 325]
[69] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 283
[70] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 283
[71] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 284

Aldrich,' since it is a disguised self-justification. An affirmation of Emily Dickinson would have amounted to a rejection of his own theory and practice.'[72] The interdiction 'cannot' comes from the same source as Lang's 'have no right to exist.' For the upholder of civilised standards Emily Dickinson represents the barbarians beating at the door. The final paragraph of Aldrich's review is reminiscent of Lang's polarisation of Dickinson and the rest of the Great Tradition:

> If Miss Dickinson's *disjecta membra* are poems, then Shakespeare's prolonged imposition should be exposed without further loss of time and Lord Tennyson ought to be advised of the error of his ways before it is too late. But I do not hold the situation to be so desperate. Miss Dickinson's versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have stirred a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighbourhood.[73]

The historical irony of this is of course devastating; it is as if Bailey is writing about himself. In these earliest reviews (both positive and negative) it is the social prejudices of the writers which are most striking. It can be seen that from the beginning of her posthumous career the reading of Emily Dickinson was coloured by preconceptions about her life and writing habits. Chief among these prejudices were the ideas that she was inexperienced, nunlike and virginal; that she was half-educated and semi-literate; that she was emotionally or intellectually impaired (or both); that an enthusiasm for her poetry was a sign of womanish emotionalism and poor taste; that she was in all senses underdeveloped—a primitive or at best a *savant*. Although as studies like Buckingham's *Reception* and Lubbers' *Critical Revolution* demonstrate, there were many and conflicting opinions about Dickinson's literary merit, the critics I have examined here set the tone of the critical climate surrounding her work until the twentieth century was well underway. Late in the 1890s younger voices like those of Rupert Hughes and Bliss Carman emerged in recognition of Dickinson, but they were to receive little support in their time.[74] In

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[72]Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 59

[73] Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, p. 284. It is ironic to note that a Puritan and exemplary late modernist with whom Dickinson has much in common, Samuel Beckett, actually chose to entitle a volume of collected prose writings *Disjecta.* Samuel Beckett: *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment,* ed., Ruby Cohn. (London: John Calder, 1983)

[74] See Buckingham, ed., *Critical Reception*, pp. 453, 498 (for Hughes); pp. 504, 545, 450 (for Carman).

fact, nothing short of a modernist revolution was required before Dickinson could emerge from decades of editorial overwriting to be rehabilitated as a major writer.

'Judging a Poem is Like Judging a Pudding': The Intentional Fallacy and the Exclusion of Consciousness.

I have already examined the Freudian basis of Harold Bloom's theories of identity-formation in poetry. Bloom's essay on Dickinson in *The Western Canon*, 'Emily Dickinson: Blanks, Transports, the Dark' provides an additional insight into the New Critical influences on his approach. Since readings of Dickinson, Plath and to a lesser extent H.D. have been heavily influenced by New Critical tenets, Bloom's essay provides a useful start for my examination of Dickinson's emergence, both into the twentieth century and into the poetry. As well as psychoanalytical presumptions about writing, New Critical ideas are also a significant block to our understanding of the function of consciousness inside the textual space. My analysis will therefore involve subjecting the New Criticism's hostility to the notion of 'intentionality' (a hostility which psychoanalytic criticism shares and was surely heavily influenced by) to some scrutiny.

Bloom's claims for Dickinson are large: 'Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other western poet since Dante.'[75] This characteristically grand gesture would seem to place Dickinson at the apex of Bloom's catalogue of writers who have attained selfhood or 'originality' by means of an achieved anxiety. Typically, Bloom is at pains to reinforce this notion of an irreducible selfhood, or shadowy authority for the poems:

> Dickinson rethought everything for herself, but she wrote lyrical meditations rather than stage dramas or mythopoeic epics. Shakespeare has hundreds of personae and Blake, dozens of what he called Giant Forms. Dickinson kept to the capital letter I while practising an art of singular economy.[76]

This passage is strongly reminiscent of the Shakespeare caricature I examine above. Again it betrays Bloom's debt to a Romantic/psychoanalytic notion of subjectivity,

[75] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994) p.291

while the emphasis on Dickinson as lyricist—the lyric poem being that most characteristic Romantic form—does not bother to speculate about the specific reasons for Dickinson's use of the form, which her classically-literate early critics regarded as barbaric. Dickinson's extensive use of the persona is also denied. The result is an easier 'fixing' or placing of the persona of *Dickinson* as presumed cognitive authority. Bloom's reading is, like his chummy description of Shakespeare in *The Western Canon*, over-familiar. To this end, his experiences with the Dickinson *oeuvre* are personalised as a kind of micro-agon: 'I had thought of brooding on Dickinson's blanks as well, but I retreated before their formidable intensity...' 'Dickinson demands so active a participation on the reader's part that one's mind had better be at its rare best. The various times I have taught her poems have left me with fierce headaches, since the difficulties force me past my limits.' This is a form of critical circumscription, a warning to the reader that any approach to Dickinson other than that of 'preternaturally close reading' (more properly, Bloom's own, migraine-inducing reading) is inadequate. Significantly, Bloom's opening claim about Dickinson's great originality is continually reiterated throughout the course of his essay: 'Dickinson is too sly to impose anything, but she is as individual a thinker as Dante...Literary originality achieves scandalous dimensions in Dickinson...If you are the major Western woman poet ever, you can afford to revere Mrs. Browning...She had the best mind of all our poets, early and late...We confront, at the height of her powers, the best mind to appear among Western poets in nearly four centuries...' That Dickinson possessed the 'best mind' of all Western poets since Dante is, for Bloom, the essential point. What might broadly be described as the historical, dramatic, definitively biographical or political 'content' of her poems is emptied out in favour of a single overriding criterion: that of canonicity. The idea of canonicity here invoked also comes suspiciously close to Arnold's 'the best that has been thought and felt.' But we may also begin to unpack the significance of Bloom's reiteration of Dickinson's intellectual pre-eminence. Is it anything other than an appeal to that nebulous entity, which we have already encountered in *The Western Canon*, the Shakespearean super-consciousness? It would appear that, for Bloom, critical hyperbole is a way of locating authority on the outer limits of the human,

[76] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.291

thus placing it beyond the reach of those critics with ideological designs on the great texts of the Western tradition. Bloom's wrestle with the angel of the Canon (here in the guise of Emily Dickinson) results in a headache which is the equivalent of Jacob's branded thigh. The critical discourse itself becomes a kind of witnessing, a privileged retelling of the parable of that struggle, which passes itself off as absolute truth. I emphasise the fact that one learns little of Dickinson in all of this, despite the sensitivity of Bloom's individual readings of her poems; once again the method is more illuminating about Bloom than it is about his ostensible subject.

At this point one might usefully invoke one of Bloom's most clear-eyed and rigorous critics, Frank Lentricchia. In his essay 'Harold Bloom: The Spirit of Revenge' in *After the New Criticism*, Lentricchia characterises Bloom's criticism as deeply (and anxiously) aware of the formative influence upon him of the New Criticism as propounded by Wimsatt, Brooks, and Penn Warren. Lentricchia notes: 'If Bloom has been preoccupied with 'thrusting aside' the New Critics from the beginning of his critical career, he has also from the very beginning been making formative intellectual decisions on the basis of that hostility-- decisions which often do not evade but rather reinstate their influence.'[77] As I have emphasised above, Bloom's insistence on poetic solitude and originality or exceptionalism is conceivably a political one. Lentricchia states:

> In his refusal to recognise any longer the constitutive role of extraliterary forces ('differences in religion and politics') upon identity, Bloom turns himself into a remarkably odd scholarly creature: the historian as aesthete. ...Bloom must rely on the sort of aesthetic doctrine which reaches its fulfilment in the hermetic and alienated view of the poetic character that we find in Mallarmé (never a man speaking to men, always a high priest speaking to privileged initiates)...The New Criticism, along with a number of other Modernisms, is a descendant of this isolationist side of romanticism...[78]

Bloom's isolationism (and even his perfect solipsist, the strong poet) is uncannily similar to the professionalised isolationism of the New Critics. Gail McDonald, in *Learning to be Modern* has placed this tendency firmly within its historical context, to illuminating effect: 'The critics, like the poets,

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[77] Frank Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism*, (London: Methuen 1983) p. 321
[78] Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism* pp.326-327

reconstituted...authority by adopting a more professional approach to their work...New Criticism, as it became institutionalised, supplied necessary and highly teachable method.'[79] McDonald has noted that the award of the Bollingen Prize of 1949 to Ezra Pound (at that time still an incumbent of St. Elizabeth's Hospital) made explicit New Criticism's depoliticised, dehistoricised stance. Bloom's affinities with this aspect of New Critical thought are clarified by Lentricchia, who emphasises the ethical implications of this:

> Bloom's recent version of Romantic aesthetic in *The Anxiety of Influence* is so far from touching on the principles of the ethical life that one might suppose that he had deliberately emptied romantic poetics of all ethical implication. If awareness of, and respect for, the other's sanctity is minimal to ethical life, then Bloom's poets move in the ethically barbarous world of the child.[80]

In Bloom's case, the 'other' of critical discourse is really the literary text under consideration. As I have noted above, it is precisely attempted elision of distance between commentary and subject (or the collapse of analogy into identity) which constitutes this unfairness and reductiveness of approach . This makes of the critic, as Lentricchia states: 'a creative competitor who knowingly distorts...one who prefers to 'misread' in order to pump up the value of his own writing.'[81] Lentricchia has recognised that

> Bloom's exclusive concentration on the titanic wilfulness of strong poets has succeeded in reinstating, against every theoretical point he has made, the principle of the author— if not in splendid isolation, then in splendidly isolated dialogue with his strong ancestors.[82]

It is clear that 'intentionality', one of the New Criticism's greatest *bêtes noires*, remains central to the debate. Upon deeper consideration, it is remarkable that anxiety about the 'intentional fallacy,' arising from W.K. Wimsatt's eponymous 1946 essay has remained like a prohibition in literary criticism for so long. Wimsatt's distaste for Romantic notions of 'inspiration' or 'self-expression' owed a great deal to the modernist elevation of 'impersonality' to the status of a cardinal virtue. Gail

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[79] Gail Mc Donald *Learning To Be Modern,* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993) p. 191
[80] Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism*, p. 330
[81] Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism,* p. 343

McDonald quotes F.W.Bateson's description of that time: '*The Sacred Wood* was almost our sacred book. It was Eliot the critic who prepared us to welcome Eliot the poet.'[83] This hints at the highly programmatic and strategic quality of much modernist work (a tendency exemplified by Ezra Pound's Imagist propaganda, as this thesis shall later show). It has become almost a commonplace to acknowledge that there was an implicit gender-bias in modernism's rejection of 'personality.' After all, as Joyce noted dryly, 'The Waste Land' ended the idea of poetry for ladies. On the academic side, as McDonald confirms: 'within the academy, the literary critics would be able to face the science faculty without shame... in particular, they aimed for an association with the orderly rigours of science and a dissociation from the presumed chaotic ease of the feminine. Their rhetorics of rigour and misogyny were responses to a loss of cultural authority.'[84] This anxiety is writ large in Wimsatt's discourse, and is especially evident in his insistence on the public value of a poem:

> The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology.[85]

The political objections which could be adduced to Wimsatt's characterisation of the poem as public property are legion,[86] however here the principal questions which arise are: if notions of intentionality are left out of account, if all possible traces of privacy are excluded from critical speculation, then how is one to approach Emily Dickinson with fairness, who wrote in intense privacy and manifestly did not 'intend' publication? Is a critical method derived largely from Eliot's (early) poetry and prose

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[82] Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism*, p. 343

[83] Quoted in McDonald, *Learning to be Modern*, p. 59

[84] McDonald, *Learning to be Modern* pp. 60, 64

[85] William K. Wimsatt *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1970) p.5

[86] This brings to mind the political affinities of Eliot, Yeats and Pound in particular. As W.H. Auden wittily wrote of the New Critical terminology: 'a society which really was like a poem and embodied all the aesthetic values of beauty, order, economy, subordination of detail to the whole effort, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class out of sight in cellars.' W. H. Auden, 'The Poet & The City' in *The Dyers Hand and Other Essays*, (London: Faber and Faber

suitable for all writers? In particular, what position do women writers occupy within this scheme? With historical hindsight, the anxious utilitarianism and narrowness of focus in Wimsatt's essay become clear: 'judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work....Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery.'[87] In this analysis, it is of course the critic who is the final arbiter of what is or is not 'relevant.' For Wimsatt, the critic's job is 'the public art of evaluating poems' almost after the fashion of an antiques expert who 'values' artefacts, and any attempt to explain the origins of a literary work in psychological or other terms is seen as eccentric and redundant: 'a poem can be only through its meaning—since its medium is words—yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant.'[88] Poetry becomes the ideal product of alienated labour, and it is just a short—if circuitous—route from here to Barthes' 'Death of the Author' and the European structuralism that Bloom denies having been influenced by.

And although Lentricchia does not make the point explicit, his recognition that 'Bloom does not so much abandon the New Criticism as relocate its idea of autonomy from the single poetic text to the psychology of the poet's imagination' hints that, in a movement which could be seen ironically as an instance of the second of his own 'revisionary ratios,' *Tessera*, or 'completion and antithesis,' Bloom reinstates the notion of intentionality as central to his own work. Except that, as I have shown, Bloom evades the unacceptable consequences (in the form of a biographical reductionism) of his actions by inflating 'authority' into a Romantic and quasi-religious power. However I would disagree with Lentricchia's contention that Bloom has succeeded in reinstating a conservative notion of the Author. As Lentricchia himself notes, Bloom seems to dissolve the idea of agency at the moment of reinstating it: 'The aestheticist impulse in his criticism severs the natural man from the poet, and the Freudianism in his theory dissolves the conscious human subject

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1987), p. 85. One is also reminded of Plath's angry renunciation of this ideology in 'The Munich Mannequins:' 'perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.' Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 262

[87] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, pp. 4-5

[88] Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 4

and so robs Bloom of any genuine claim to humanism.'[89] My previous chapter illustrates the strategy underlying this contradictory impulse in Bloom. Here I merely note that the gesture towards intentionalism is evaded by means of Bloom's recourse to numinous genius at the limits of the human (as with Dickinson in his *Western Canon* essay), or else to psychoanalytic models, with the emphasis on unconscious process effectively wresting power *away* from the author (who may still be, strangely enough, one of the 'best minds' of Western Civilisation). The sole victor in all of this is, as Lentricchia points out, the critic.

Harold Bloom's unease with the idea of intentionality is instructive, however. The entirety of Bloom's critical *oeuvre* has been concerned with explaining poetic uniqueness or originality. This assumption of *presence* (even if it is a presence which has been evacuated by a later writer) in his affirmation of rudimentary and exclusive lines of continuity between great works, demonstrates how fundamental notions of *origin* are to any study of influence. Traceable lines of development within a given *oeuvre* may provide clues about the evolution of a poetic style, but this principle becomes less certain when applied in diachronic fashion to account for the spaces between writers of different eras. The extreme historical self-consciousness ascribed to these writers is also clearly a unifying projection of the literary historian, or 'historian as aesthete'; efforts of this kind to explain the *fact* of the text are ultimately self-defeating. But how *are* we to account for the perceptible lines of continuity between writers if not by recourse to theories of psychogenesis? As Cynthia Ann Hogue has noted in her thesis on subjectivity in Dickinson, these questions are urgently relevant to any study of women's poetry: 'We must remain attentive to the notion of female subjectivity and continue to explore its 'possible' operations, because not to do so repeats, with the new face of postmodernism, the age-old effacement of both women and 'the feminine.'[90] My contention is that to attempt to explain the formation of identity in poetry exclusively in terms of *influence*, as many of these psychoanalytic studies do, runs the inevitable risk of devaluing it, because it is viewed as symptomatic and compensatory.[91] These critical

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[89] Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, p. 336

[90] Hogue, Cynthia Ann: 'Figuring Woman Out: Feminine Subjectivity in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and H.D.' Ph.D. Thesis, University of Arizona, 1990, p.35

[91] John Cody's 1971 'psychobiography' of Dickinson, *After Great Pain,* is a case in point. Cody's thesis is that Dickinson's insight into the nature of consciousness was due solely to her own

approaches contrive to avoid the intentional fallacy, but in so doing (as Hogue has remarked) inevitably devalue the idea of a feminine authorial subjectivity. From a feminist point of view, then, such approaches tend towards regression. This is why the notion of consciousness in poetry is so vital. If 'identity' can be seen in terms of the liberation or realisation of consciousness in the space of the text, as Bachelard argues, then women writers are automatically on equal terms with their male counterparts. It also explains, as I will demonstrate in due course, the persistent dovetailing of spatial metaphor with ideas about consciousness and self in the work of all three of the writers I am considering. I am concerned with the ways in which consciousness in the work of these poets manifests itself as a structure of resistance, with how the coming-into-being of the poem as an instance of consciousness, almost of *wakefulness*, can be shown to bear traces of pressure from manifold sources. In this way it is possible to maintain the importance of gender as a factor, while avoiding a programmatic adherence to generalised notions about 'feminine' subjectivity. Similarly, an emphasis on the Bachelardian idea of consciousness insofar as it is manifested as part of the cognitive space or structure of the poem, helps to avoid the reductiveness of the psychoanalytic approach. This interpretation will, however, leave room for speculation about 'extra-textual' factors where appropriate (i.e. where they have conceivably impacted on the consciousness posited by the poem). I shall examine the poems not merely for what they 'contain', but also for what they can be shown to say about their own incipience when viewed structurally and contextually.

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abnormal psychology and that this in turn resulted from 'inadequate' mothering: 'It was Mrs. Dickinson's failure as a sufficiently loving and admirable developmental model that set in motion the series of psychological upheavals which were unmitigated misfortunes for Emily Dickinson the *woman*. These maturational impasses consigned her to a life of sexual bewilderment, anxiety, and frustration by impairing those processes of psychic growth which would have made the roles of wife and mother possible. With reference to Emily Dickinson the *artist*, one cannot speak of misfortunes at all. For, amazing as it may seem, Mrs. Dickinson's inadequacies, the sequence of internal conflicts to which they gave rise, and the final psychotic breakdown all conspired in a unique way to make of Emily Dickinson a great and prolific poet.' *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Oxford University Press, 1971) pp. 484-5 That Cody is deeply indebted to normative psychiatry goes without saying, but what is perhaps most disquieting about this passage is the total schism between 'woman' and 'poet.' Not content to psychoanalyse Dickinson on the evidence of her writings, Cody goes on to speculate about her mother's psychology in the absence of *her* voice. 'What factors made Mrs. Dickinson an inadequate mother?' he asks. 'And how many children had Lady Macbeth?' we might well rejoin. David Holbrook's 1976 study of Sylvia Plath, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone Press, 1988) makes the same kind of dubious psychoanalysis the basis of his reduction of Plath.

'The Brain Has Corridors': Dickinson's Spatial Revelations

> This Consciousness that is aware
> Of Neighbours and the Sun
> Will be the one aware of Death
> And that itself alone
>
> Is traversing the interval
> Experience between
> And most profound experiment
> Appointed unto Men -
>
> How adequate unto itself
> Its properties shall be
> Itself unto itself and none
> Shall make discovery.
>
> Adventure most unto itself
> The Soul condemned to be -
> Attended by a single Hound
> Its own identity.[92]

Situating Emily Dickinson at the beginning of the micro-tradition within modernism that I am attempting to trace prompts the question: what marks Dickinson's voice out as seminal, not just in regard to later women writers, but to the movement of Anglo-American modernism in general? In ways, the above poem (J.822) represents a great deal of what modernism came to recognise in Dickinson. From an end-of-century vantage point, its significance is easily overlooked—it is also representative of Dickinson's work in general in that it comes modestly attired. The insistent five-fold repetition of 'itself,' throughout the poem might be regarded as excessive—such a lack of surface artistry would certainly have been deplored by Andrew Lang—but it is possible to infer that in this instance the plain style has arisen of necessity, either in answer to a need which is not primarily aesthetic, or because the signifiers and gestures of a dominant literary tradition are inadequate or inaccessible. In *Nature's Nation*, historian Perry Miller describes the Puritan 'plain style' and its consequences in a way that usefully illuminates Dickinson's methods. With specific reference to Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, Miller uncovers the irony of the style in its later incarnations:

> from both, from either Frost or Eliot, comes the ironic disclosure
> so long hidden within the Puritan code: as the queer consequence
> of the Puritan's proud willingness to try all things and to prove
> all things by the plain style, the rhetorical discipline, left to itself,
> would turn into an instrument not of a conservative utility
> but of a reckless subjection of historical certitudes to corroding
> examination. The forthright method proved to be, once it survived
> as a method, the most subversive power that the wicked could invoke
> against those generalities it had, long ago, been designed to protect.[93]

Miller's characterisation of the style as a kind of loose cannon (or even a loaded gun) when detached from the theological and psychological certainties of the seventeenth-century dispensation goes some way towards explaining Dickinson's paradoxical stance of revolution *within* conservatism. Furthermore, Miller recognises that

> by the nature of the beast, the plain style is obliged to expound...
> as a rhetorical method...it was left to operate on its own, aware
> of its isolation, its disseverance from theology and cosmology.
> The word itself, and by this I must include also the practitioners
> of the word, had eventually, however reluctantly, to ask,
> 'Who's over me?' The moment it admitted that question to the
> new context wherein scholastic rubrics had vanished, it had no
> option but to insist: 'Truth hath no confines.'[94]

Miller's point, that the style continued to function as a powerful expository tool in the absence of a justifying authority, has obvious implications for Dickinson's work. 'This Consciousness that is aware' displays a theorem's explanatory scrupulousness, but it also sheds light on the ground Dickinson shared with certain of her eminent contemporaries. As Sharon Cameron has observed: 'it was not until Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* was published in 1961 that her connetion to Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman was firmly established.'[95]

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[92] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 399

[93] Perry Miller: *Nature's Nation*, (Harvard University Press, 1967) p. 219

[94] Miller, *Nature's Nation*, p. 220

[95] Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) p. 12. Cameron's thesis in *Lyric Time* has been influential in the formation of my own, especially with its emphasis on the function of consciousness in Dickinson's poetry. However, I see the poetry's delineation of consciousness in and of time as secondary to its overriding sense of spatial awareness. There is, nevertheless, a similarity between Cameron's insight that in some of Dickinson's lyrics 'history gets sacrificed to presence,' and Bachelard's

Stylistically, in the pared down, tetrameter/trimeter version of Puritan hymn form frequently employed by Dickinson, this poem readily situates itself inside the context supplied by Miller. But the question 'Who's over me?' applies here too. While the emphatic opening, '*This* Consciousness' is a gesture of inwardness, the poem points not only towards a supposed speaker but also—because the text is manifestly that putative speaker's sole representation—towards its own presence, the point where voice, location, and temporal sequence collide. 'This Consciousness,' then, is a consciousness which the poem *itself* instigates. While, for example, a critic like Juhasz characterises Dickinson's language as reflective or descriptive of prior mental experience, I would argue (with Bachelard) that her poetic spaces can be conceived of breaking radically with anteriority, whether that is the past of the self or of the wider traditions in which the self is implicated.[96] There is a witty structural echo of this reification of consciousness in the poem at the first stanza break, where the words 'itself alone' seem to overlook a void before the sentence (and the poem) resume, combining expressions of both time and space to describe just such a movement: 'Is traversing the interval.' There are four significant terms in this first stanza, namely 'Consciousness,' the rather arbitrary configuration of 'Neighbours and the Sun,' and 'Death.' The tableau is reminiscent of a better-known poem 'Because I could not stop for Death-' (J.712) where a threesome comprising the speaker, Death, and Immortality proceed past objects which are described in terms of action (the children strive, the grain gazes) but which somehow contrive to remain eerily static. In J.822 the 'Neighbours and the Sun,' words which attain materiality by means of Dickinson's capitalisation, are characterised in terms of their *adjacency.* To describe them as metonyms might even be to miss the point, as they are more properly *objects* inside the space that the poem conjures. As in J.712, they are

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statement that poetic phenomenology 'liquidates the past and confronts what is new.' Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxii

[96] Juhasz's feminist approach leads her to view Dickinson's 'withdrawal' into the space of the mind as wholly strategic: '"strategy" means that Dickinson chose to keep to her house, to her room, to live in her mind rather than in the external world, in order to achieve certain goals and to circumvent or overcome certain forces in her environment and experience that were in opposition to these goals.' Or 'I am claiming that Dickinson's move into the mind can best be understood as occasioned by her social and psychological situation as a woman who wanted to be a poet.' *'The Undiscovered Continent:' Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) pp. 4-5, 12. In my view, even while asserting that Dickinson did exercise her will in this matter, it is difficult for Juhasz to avoid the compensatory flavour of the 'lifestyle

exceeded or passed by the superior terms of the equation, Consciousness and Death. The second stanza carries over the spatial implications of the first and adds, by means of 'interval,' a temporal dimension. Here there is another structural echo of the experiential chasm which is the poem's theme, this time by means of Dickinson's reversal of word order. In 'Experience between/ And most profound experiment/ Appointed unto men' the word 'between' literally inserts itself *between* the two main terms of the sentence in a dramatic gesture of reification, as well as permitting a partial rhyme of the second and fourth lines. The second stanza is significant not just because of its remarkable formal coherence, but because this 'interval' is recognisable as the location where some of Dickinson's most penetrating work is situated. It is comparable to the point at which 'the Windows failed' in 'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -' (J.465); it is like the 'Chaos - Stopless - cool - ' experienced by the alienated speaker of J.510, although there the name 'Death' is denied it; and perhaps it also shares something of the 'beautiful but bleak condition' which helps to define 'Wonder' in J.1331. It could conceivably be described as the Dickinson sublime, but the pitfalls of establishing an absolute identity between states described by various poems are manifold; insofar as those poems not only describe but attempt (as they often do) to bring such states into existence (in Bachelard's words, 'here expression creates being'), their differences from each other are clear. This poem plays with the notion of such difference. The extremity of distance is a common theme in Dickinson, often actualised by means of various structural devices. Here, the distance/difference between 'Experience' and 'Experiment' is simultaneously reinforced and subverted— both words have an identical etymological root in *expirere*, to test or prove.

A kind of reticence also begins to creep into the poem at this point. 'Death' is transformed into the euphemistic phrase 'most profound experiment/ Appointed unto men.' This expression hints at a kind of *translation* (another common nineteenth-century euphemism for death) from one order of experience to another. And what is represented by this 'interval' between experience and experiment? The poem posits the existence of a distinct zone between the completed past and the unknowable

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choice' that she depicts Dickinson as having made, even while she rightly dismisses psychoanalytic interpretations like that of John Cody as crudely compensatory.

future. It is a space of radical self-consciousness and self-sufficiency, as the third stanza confirms[97]

> How adequate unto itself
> Its properties shall be
> Itself unto itself and none
> Shall make discovery -

There is a hint of Emersonian self-sufficiency here, but this is not isolation within a social context. 'Itself' is repeated obsessively, as though the poem were insisting on identity, but the proliferation of this word inside such a small space has a curious effect. The word does insist on its own uniqueness, but at the same time it is surprisingly neutral and generic; the specific 'properties' of this consciousness are never delineated. Thus the repetition of 'itself' also functions as a barrier to understanding—its presence reinforces the poem's structural self-identity while *preventing* full disclosure. A *self* is envisaged, a self with properties and an identity of its own (and it is important to note the possessive tone of these words). Sharon Cameron recognises this in her examination of Dickinson's fascicles: 'what these poems make available is interiority itself—interiority without either origin or outside. To read Dickinson in the fascicles is to encounter an interiority found there as if it were our own.'[98] This is strongly reminiscent of Bachelard's interior/exterior dialectic, as when he states:

> inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity; consequently, by omitting geometrical references when we speak of the first expression of being, by choosing more concrete, more phenomenologically exact inceptions, we shall come to realize that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances.[99]

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[97] Miller's description of the doctrine of preparation which evolved in New England and which is visible in the writings of Thomas Hooker may help us to understand something of this intense awareness of degrees of inner experience. Miller shows how the writings of Hooker and other Puritan divines portrayed 'a subtle analysis if the temporal process of regeneration, so that they were able to give elaborate descriptions of every step, beginning with the most minute diagnosis of the dawning of a premonition' which created 'an attitude of expectancy.' Miller, *Nature's Nation*, p. 56

[98] Cameron, Sharon: *Choosing not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 187

[99] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 216

But by a kind of Bachelardian cross-contamination of concepts, the interiority which Cameron identifies in Dickinson's poem is not available to the critic. It is an interiority which bears the traits of exteriority, in that it excludes. This poem signals an interiority which is never disclosed. The poem's narrative effectively dramatises this withholding, which is really a kind of refusal to publish. This theme is then made explicit: 'Itself unto itself and none/ Shall make discovery.' And this undoubtedly alienates the reader. Contrary to Cameron's assertion, the interiority hinted at here is the property of the speaker alone.

Significantly, the attainment of this 'interval' is figured as an event which has not yet occurred. Dickinson elsewhere described death as democratic[100]; like 'experience', it is shared by everyone. However it is interesting to note the effect that this invocation of death and then the switch to the future tense have produced. If anything, the effect is one of *increased* solitude. The figure of 'Death,' like 'Neighbours and the Sun,' has served a definite purpose, it has enabled the speaker to posit an 'interval' or space where it is present only to (or 'unto') itself. It is at this point that the poem's missing term occurs as a kind of deafening silence in the text—no mention of God has been made. The absolute quality of 'none' is clarified, which in turn helps us to understand the precise irony of 'condemned' in the poem's final stanza. It is as if the poem is posing the very question articulated by Miller: 'Who's over me?' This consciousness is a pioneer in the wilderness, both by virtue of its discovery of that wilderness, and because of its very priority there.[101] For the poem's final image the reader readily furnishes associations of Baskervillian hell-hounds, but the attendant hound may in fact cut a more homely figure.[102] The Hound provides companionship, and the figure of the split self serves to reinforce the theme of sufficiency: we have here a *population* of One.

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[100] See Dickinson, Complete Poems, p. 285: 'Death is the Common Right.'

[101] The same kind of metaphysical conundrum is to be found in George Herbert's 'The Collar,' or In Yeats's 'Dialogue of Self and Soul' where it produces a similar drama of inwardness, but in Dickinson's poem the operation of grace is significantly absent, and no calming external voice intervenes.

[102] This is reminiscent of Dickinson's frequent humorous references to her own dog Carlo in her letters to Higginson, most notably during the course of her abjuration of publicity: 'If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase - and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me - then - My Barefoot-Rank is better-' Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 174

Given that God is conceived as being absent, and that the narrative serves also to exclude the reader with his 'too telescopic eyes,' this poem establishes an area wherein the self has free rein, or at least adumbrates the existence of such a space, without disclosing its precise co-ordinates. If we consider the wider significance of this, it becomes clear why Dickinson has been regarded as a foundational figure for twentieth-century modernism, a central concern of which is with the self's alienation from history and from its social and cultural environment, and also why modernism has in a profound sense influenced the way Dickinson is read. But I suggest that Dickinson goes further. It is my contention that Dickinson's texts posit the existence of an alternative mode of being in an almost mystical sense: in other words, that while in certain key modernist works the self's agonised alienation presupposes some prior historical or social reality which has been lost, Dickinson frequently succeeds in negating the possibility of there having been a prior order of things, or even a time *before* the poem. In my view this plausibly accounts for the absence of a strongly elegiac tone in her work, something which distinguishes her from later modernist writers.[103] Thus Dickinson emerges as a powerfully original poet in an almost Bloomian sense, although the implications of this observation are again much closer to Bachelard's poetic phenomenology:

> the essential newness of the poetic image poses the problem of the speaking being's creativeness. Through this creativeness the imagining consciousness proves to be, very simply, but very purely, an origin. In a study of the imagination, a phenomenology of the poetic imagination must concentrate on bringing out this quality of origin in various poetic images.[104]

However, the gender implications of this analysis should also be highlighted. In the second stanza of the poem, this self

> Is traversing the interval
> Experience between
> And most profound experiment
> Appointed unto *Men* -

[103] Cf. my comments about the atmosphere of belatedness in Plath's poetry in Chapter 4, pp. 227-228

[104] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxiv

[italics added] That the word *Men* is being used in a general way goes without saying, but this salient usage (as well as being capitalised, the word is also strongly stressed) might hint that Dickinson is inserting her narrative between the generality of experience and that experiment (unnamed) which is an exclusively masculine preserve. In this analysis, the poem suddenly becomes startlingly articulate about its own status as a gendered text. Among the many profound experiments appointed unto *men* at this time were scientific, philosophical or literary endeavours, fields in which they could expect to achieve distinction and renown. The contrast with Dickinson's narrative is striking, particularly when we remember one of the central paradoxes of her work: a determined refusal to publish[105] combined with the evidence (everywhere in the poems) that she was greatly preoccupied with notions of intellectual distinction and literary fame. In this way, the poem's representational status is far in excess of its explicit statement. It is in itself an 'interval' between two kinds of oblivion—the oblivion of the unexamined life and that of the life which continues after articulation has ceased. And it is in the opening up of this conceptual space that Dickinson herself becomes most vitally representative for subsequent generations of women writers. Again and again, as I shall show, the poems body forth this idea of an 'interval', a space (even if tiny) or a time (even if momentary) which permits a radical intellectual and imaginative freedom from fixed notions of identity. The resulting impression is of a flourishing underground life, an *oeuvre* which could properly be described as utopian.

I wish now to examine another Dickinson poem in which the spatial metaphor is dominant, 'Like Eyes that looked on Wastes - ' (J. 458) In this poem the link between spatiality and self is quite explicit. Like J.822, a kind of wilderness of selfhood is evoked, and this is immediately reinforced by the poem's opening, where the revelation of this simile's identity is deferred: we do not immediately know what resembles 'Eyes that looked on Wastes' and we do not find out until halfway through

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[105] The evidence suggests that Dickinson in fact went out of her way to avoid publication, on one occasion enlisting the help of T.W. Higginson for the purposes of putting Helen Hunt Jackson off the trail. In October 1876 she writes: 'Dear Friend - Are you willing to tell me what is right? Mrs. Jackson - of Colorado -was with me a few moments this week, and wished me to write for this - I told her I was unwilling, and she asked me why? - I said I was incapable and she seemed not to believe me and asked me not to decide for a few Days - meantime, she would write me - She was so sweetly noble, I would regret to estrange her, and if you would be willing to give me a note saying you disapproved it, and thought me unfit, she would believe you -'Dickinson, *Collected Letters*, p. 562

the poem. The result is a feeling of disorientation and discomfort—a sensation of being in the middle of something rather than at the beginning. In this is bears comparison with my analysis of Plath's 'The Colossus' (see p. 227 below) except that here the *reader* is placed in the position of belatedness, and not the poem's speaker. It quickly becomes clear that this is a zero space, the eyes are 'Incredulous of Ought / But Blank and steady Wilderness - / Diversified by night.' 'Ought' is a complex pun; as a variant spelling of 'aught' it has the straightforward meaning of 'anything', but in a characteristic Dickinson move the *verb* ought, meaning obligation, has here been transformed into a noun. The word also possesses a tertiary meaning—it was occasionally used instead of 'nought,' with which it is rhymed in the second stanza of this poem. This highlights the absolute negation which the poem is attempting to describe. In this stanza the speaker gazes on the location of this wilderness which, it transpires, is a face. The similarity between this face and the speaker's own is suggested without an explicit statement of identity being made. This absence hints that an ultimate collapse and conflation of identity is being warded off throughout the poem, but the obvious explanation is that the speaker is looking into a mirror. Indeed, the impression is of two mirrors reflecting each other, creating a space which is infinite but empty. An agonised stasis, almost a paralysis, is hinted at:

> I offered it no Help -
> Because the Cause was Mine -
> The Misery a Compact
> As hopeless - as divine -

'Because the Cause was Mine' could conceivably be understood as 'because it was my fault,' but to paraphrase the line thus would be to miss the precise significance of the words. 'Cause' presupposes an agency or origin, an idea which the poem (and Bachelard's notion of poetic origin) as a whole militates against—here agency has been replaced by infinity. But the word 'Compact' also subtly introduces this idea: the word means 'closely packed together' but it can also be defined as an official contract or agreement. A kind of voluntarism is thus hinted at by the text, and this is made even clearer in the final, highly ambiguous stanza. The doubling effect of the poem is reinforced by the repetition 'Neither - would be absolved / Neither - would be a Queen' and these lines also possess a kind of double

vision. Ostensibly, they are a statement of fact— both selves are mysteriously absolved and queenly by virtue of their doubleness— if one was taken away then this 'hopeless' though 'divine' state would be lost. But a subtle secondary meaning is operating here also; if we take 'would' to mean 'wants to,' then the idea that this is a voluntary state is unavoidable. The implication is that these selves *could* be absolved, *could* be queens, but will never be because they are unwilling to break their stasis. Clearly, a radical dichotomy between exterior and interior is being established, and this is an aid to understanding the precise meaning of the word 'perish' in the poem's final line. If, as I have shown, the poem sets up an opposition between the interior space created by the mutual gaze of the speaker's selves and the suggested (though never properly evoked) exterior of that condition, then 'perish' takes on a profound irony. 'We perish - Tho' We Reign -' hints merely that the speaker(s) have died to the external world or have ceased to exist there. The word order of this sentence gives priority to the notion of sovereignty, making it read like an assertion rather than a statement of despair. It is as if the mutual gaze has created a wholly other order of existence, one which is self-sustaining and distinguished, but which cannot be comprehended from outside. And that outside, as with the previous poem, *includes* the reader. We realise that the poem itself has become a kind of reflective surface. The reader gazes into it from the realm of 'Ought', expecting it to quite transparently reveal the speaker. Nevertheless a slight shift in the angle of vision is required before the text, by a sort of anamorphosis, properly discloses its doubleness. As with J.822, an 'interval' has been envisaged which is the perceptual space between the face and its own image, a space which contains infinity. The discomfort or 'Misery' of this absolute state is made explicit, but the implicit element of choice is strongly reminiscent of J.303, 'The Soul selects her own Society' where the effect is similarly absolute:

> I've known her- from an ample nation -
> Choose One -
> Then - close the Valves of her attention -
> Like Stone -

Here 'One,' the indefinite person, is surely to be identified with the speaker, while the 'I've known her' becomes a kind of testimony—this is a privileged

narrative, it is implied, from *one who is in a position to know*. The same fundamental privacy that we found in J.822 is being insisted upon here, and there is the same sense that the choice, once made, is final.

David Porter identified has Dickinson as post-apocalyptic voice, a poet of 'aftermath'[106] an idea with which John Cody's *After Great Pain* is in agreement. In both cases the precipitating event is presumed to be some form of psychological or emotional breakdown. In Ted Hughes's introduction to his Faber selection of Dickinson's poems he suggests that this might have been a shamanistic psychic descent of a kind consistent with his views (see my analysis of this in Chapter 4) on this process in the work of Sylvia Plath.[107] Of course, the documentary evidence for experiences of this nature in Dickinson's life is tantalisingly scanty. In my view the absence of evidence also stands as a kind of admonishment, continually highlighting the need of critics to supplement what is presumed to be a lack in Dickinson's oeuvre by means of (often very reductive) biographical speculation. The poems' repeated emphasis on *choice* or their dramatisation of situations of compulsion shows the idea of psychic aftermath to be misleading. In the case of J. 303 the impression given is one of omnipotence, an almost megalomaniacal exultation. But one kind of aftermath the poems do bear witness to is the aftermath of choice, and this frequently involves a dramatisation of the enormity of consequence. 'Like Eyes that looked on Wastes' is a clear example of this, as is 'Me from Myself - to banish - ' (J.642), which shows the poet musing on a similar dilemma. However, these poems often seem far too urgent to justify Porter's description.

> Me from Myself - to banish -
> Had I art -
> Impregnable my Fortress
> Unto All Heart -
>
> But since Myself - assault Me -
> How have I peace
> Except by subjugating

[106] David Porter, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981)

[107] Hughes writes, 'It seems to have recurred to her as a physical state, almost a trance state. In this condition, there opened to her a vision—final reality, her own soul, the soul within the universe—in all her descriptions of its nature, she never presumed to give it a name. It was her deeper, [*sic.*] holiest experience; it was also the most terrible: timeless, deathly, vast, intense.' *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. xv.

Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication -
Me - of Me?

This poem is about the impossibility of secession and in some—now largely obscure—ways is startlingly contemporary: consciousness is figured as kind of Fort Sumter of the self. But readings which claim the poem typifies the pain and chaos of a divided psyche are wide of the mark. The essential, and initially puzzling, fact is that the poem is predominantly couched in the infinitive form. The result is a masking of intent, or in a profoundly ironic sense, an artful impenetrability. The first stanza is especially indicative of this—how are we to understand the poem's argument when its grammar is no aid to clarification? It is my contention that this stanza can accurately be read as a detached speculation on the possibility of self-banishment, or as a kind of self-interrogation: *would* I banish myself if I had the art to do so? The refusal to inflect only serves to underline the stalemate; it is as if, by excluding a subject as well as a tense from the sentence, the poem refuses to favour one side ('Me') over the other ('Myself'), and thus maintains an impression of perfect equality and symmetry. 'Had I Art' reads like a small personal joke. In this manner we can read the stanza's final lines as a statement of consequence or of fact without wondering whether the 'Heart' is another attribute of the speaker (or, more properly, the mutual *voice* of the poem). Much as the subject of J.303 was 'Unmoved,' the fortress-self of this poem is 'Impregnable...Unto All Heart.'[108] The voice speculates whether this situation might be ameliorated. A possible method is suggested in the second stanza, but it is extreme; again, by means of the uninvolved infinitive the voice ensures a minimum of self-implicating action. The stanza asks: since a civil war of the self would be necessary to achieve 'penetrability' how would peace ensue but by the subjugation or extinction of consciousness? The introduction of 'Abdication' in the third stanza underlines the crucial idea of choice: abdication is a voluntary action. But the most intriguing aspect of this stanza is the identity of 'We're.' This word appears to refer back to the 'Consciousness' of the previous stanza, provoking

[108] Cf. This notion of impregnability and my examination of the state of pregnancy in the work of H.D. and Plath in Chapters 3 and 4.

curiosity about the other term in this equation, which it seems can only be the peculiarly neutral, uninflected *voice* of the poem. This interpretation ironises the line 'How this be' by making 'this' refer to the poem itself in the manner of the triumphant last line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18: 'And *this* gives life to thee.'[109] Dickinson also uses this pun in the final lines of 'I dwell in Possibility -' when she writes: 'For Occupation - This -/ The spreading wide my narrow Hands/ To gather Paradise -'[110] and the capitalisation of the word clarifies its significance. It is interesting to consider that 'abdication' has its roots in statement, since it signifies a formal renunciation and derives from the Latin *abdicare*, to disclaim. The poem thus admits two self-supporting conclusions: the first being an implicit rejection of abdication if that involves making the self available 'Unto All Heart'; the second implying that in fact abdication has already taken place-- that the poem itself is a kind of formal renunciation (L *renunciatio*: a declaration) involving both consciousness and voice and resulting in a specifically textual identity 'Me - of Me?' where 'Me' becomes the poem *literally* enunciating itself. Consciousness has abdicated into the space of language, since articulation involves a certain degree of subjection, or a placing of thought under rule. By this means Dickinson demonstrates not only that she has Art, but also that she has *choice*: this consciousness is refusing to abdicate further. This in turn suggests a possible reinterpretation of the final lines of the first stanza:

> Had I Art -
> Impregnable my Fortress
> Unto All Heart -

as: if I had art enough, I would make my fortress impregnable unto all heart. One cannot help but feel that the poem's obscurity has been willed, or rather that its overt simplicity is a deliberate masking strategy of the sort I have already identified in J.822. The same interior/exterior dialectic has been established in this poem, it is a double narrative in a fundamental sense. And like J.822, a radical and absolute choice is being masked by a narrative of implied willessness. This poem *disclaims* responsibility. It is, after all, framed as a question: it is almost as if the voice is

[109] Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 1311
[110] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 327

responding to an entreaty or is attempting to justify itself to a second party.[111] The refusal to inflect also becomes a means of ensuring the self-containment of the structure—it remains as far as possible impregnable, uninfluenced by external factors.

The presentation of the verbal structure as a fortress is not uncommon in Dickinson. In 'I dwell in Possibility - ' (J.657) 'Possibility' is described as 'A fairer House than Prose - ' and is never explicitly *defined* as poetry. However, the structure is described as 'Impregnable of Eye - ' and that word 'impregnable' is intimately linked to the poem's refusal to name: to name would be to make transparent to the eye and thus to devalue an activity which is justified only because it *is* radically unknowable. Structural metaphors of this kind serve a similar function to figures of spatiality in Dickinson's work: they accommodate a play of consciousness, they are the means by which a consciousness which is half afraid of its own revolutionary aspects simultaneously creates and conceals itself. The most striking and emphatic structural metaphor employed by Dickinson appeared as a definition in a letter of 1876: 'Nature is a Haunted House - but Art - a House that tries to be Haunted.'[112] The image of the haunted house becomes enormously resonant, as I shall show throughout the rest of this thesis. Dickinson's most explicit poem on the subject is J.670:

> One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
> One need not be a House -
> The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
> Material Place -
>
> Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
> External Ghost
> Than its interior Confronting -
> That Cooler Host.
>
> Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,

[111] On the subject of 'entreaty' and the avoidance of publication, in 1877 (late in their correspondence) Dickinson wrote to Higginson: '...Often, *when troubled by entreaty*, that paragraph of your's has saved me— 'Such being the Majesty of the Art you presume to practice, you can at least take time before dishonouring it,' and Enobarbus said 'Leave that which leaves itself.' ...I shall look with joy for the 'Little Book,' because it is your's, thought I seek you in vain in the magazines, where you once wrote— ...I recently found to Papers of your's that were unknown to me, and wondered new at your withdrawing Thought so sought by others. When flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr. Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their absence—assuring me they lived.' [Italics added] Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 573

[112] Dickinson, *Letters* p. 236

The Stones a'chase -
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter -
In lonesome Place -

Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
Should startle most -
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body - borrows a Revolver -
He Bolts the Door -
O'erlooking a superior spectre -
Or More -

In this poem, interiority is conceived as a threat. The conventional interiority of the room or house (even if haunted) is reassuring when compared with the 'Corridors' of the brain. But since the poem explicitly deals with unnerving and unexpected doubleness, one expects to discover a 'concealed' meaning here also. And so it proves, if we consider the language of the poem's second stanza. There is a characteristic confusion of reference in the third line: does 'its' refer to the 'Brain' of the first stanza, or to the recently introduced 'External Ghost?' If to the first term, then the confrontation is with those internal corridors whose plurality may help explain the term 'Host' (meaning a great number). If to the second, then it is the sensed internality of the external object which terrifies, implying that what is to be feared is interiority in a general sense—the interior existence of others as well as the self. 'That Cooler Host' can thus be read in the sense of the hidden self which merely entertains the external one. There is evidence to suggest that this internal self is being figured as *more* real than its visible counterpart, which may explain the use of the term 'Ghost:' here the power of the interior is such that it renders *external* existence immaterial, unreal. This interpretation is supported by the realization that Dickinson is consciously employing certain stock features of Gothic narrative: the haunted chamber or house, the hidden assassin, and the haunted abbey of the third stanza. These effects make the concept of external or 'actual' haunting less frightening because more conventional. The materiality of 'The Stones a'chase' is undeniable, but it also suggests the shadows cast by gravestones, which the spooked imagination presumably metamorphoses into ghosts (and not even real ones, the poem implies). This use of Gothic imagery also hints that Dickinson is engaged in a process of

revision or redefinition in a specifically literary sense—confrontation with the self is being figured as something entirely new. It is a revelation of interiority comparable to that of Hopkins: 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/ May who ne'er hung there.'[113] There is a similar spatial quality to Dickinson's description, here solitude is also a location: 'one's a'self encounter - / In lonesome Place - '

The fourth stanza maintains that conventional threats are no threats: 'Assassin hid in our Apartment/ Be Horror's least,' while the final stanza makes a mockery of the precautionary measures adopted by 'The Body'. The first line of this stanza may serve to indicate the innate artificiality (or again, the unreality) of defence mechanisms; to borrow a revolver suggests a rather extreme and desperate necessity. Significantly the body is figured as a masculine, active principle: 'He Bolts the Door - ' but in doing so he misses the point, in an important sense he does not 'see to see.' 'O'erlooking a superior spectre -/ Or More:' there is another buried etymological pun in the penultimate line-- 'spectre' derives from the Latin *specere*, to look at, which is precisely what 'The Body' fails to do. Or does it? 'O'erlooking' also carries a secondary meaning, to overlook or survey, in which case a reinterpretation of this stanza is called for. The body which has borrowed a revolver and locked the world out may now be free to realise the superiority of the internal spectre, or, the poem hints, 'More.' Does 'More' mean more than one spectre, or does it stand for the implied plenitude of the interior realm, only visible when the external world has been banished? It could be seen as either a promise *or* a threat.

At this point it may be helpful to consider the poem's vocabulary in greater detail. The words which describe this interior existence are for the most part superlatives: 'surpassing', 'Cooler', 'most', 'superior', 'more,' and they strongly suggest that the internal self is the *better* self. It might also be expedient to recall that 'Host' possesses a tertiary meaning; in Catholic doctrine it signifies the Real Presence, which is internally assimilated. This interpretation is supported somewhat by a reading of the poem's variant words, as Dickinson also suggested 'That Whiter Host' for 'That Cooler Host.' When these nuances are taken into account, the body's extreme measures begin to resemble the action of the Soul in selecting her own

[113] Hopkins, 'No Worse, There is None' in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol 2, ed.

society. Significantly, the poem breaks off just as it is beginning to hint at more, a familiar Dickinson tactic. A rich interiority has again been asserted without being revealed. In this poem it is the internal/external boundary which is frightening, both to the self who must overcome it in order to confront 'That Cooler Host' and to the conventional ones on the outside, who are childishly startled by external ghosts. This is the source of the poem's boast; its speaker is in a position of superior knowledge and by the end of the poem is actively colluding in concealment, like the speaker of J. 443:

> To simulate - is stinging work -
> To cover what we are
> From Science - and from Surgery -
> Too Telescopic Eyes
> To bear on us unshaded -
> For their - sake - not for Ours -

Concealment is therefore a threat, a way of asserting power by means of withheld knowledge, although in J.443 this is ironically presented as a form of compassion. It is also powerfully reminiscent of much of Sylvia Plath's later work, in particular 'Purdah' where the threat implied by the insistent but seemingly innocent repetition of 'I shall unloose' is in fact realised:

> And at his next step
> I shall unloose
>
> I shall unloose—
> From the small jeweled
> Doll he guards like a heart—
>
> The lioness,
> The shriek in the bath,
> The cloak of holes.[114]

(Of course in Plath, the 'stinging work' of simulation is not described as a choice: conformity is presented as having been in some way *enforced.*) By Dickinson's standards then, J.670 constructs a successfully Haunted House, suggesting that its

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M. H. Abrams (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), p. 1588
[114] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 244

(withheld) interior is more real and more hair-raising than anything previously imagined.

I have commented above that Dickinson's Haunted House is a central and profoundly resonant structural metaphor, and this is so not only in her own poetry but also in many of her modernist successors. A striking instance of this is Wallace Stevens's 'A Postcard From the Volcano' (yet another Dickinsonian metaphor) from *Ideas of Order*. In Stevens's poem the Haunted House represents modern poetry's bequest to the future and thus becomes a powerful figure for poetic influence. The poem is a 'shuttered mansion-house;' the means by which poets will have 'left what still is / The look of things, left what we felt / At what we saw.' For this reason, Stevens maintains, 'the windy sky'

> Cries out a literate despair.
> We knew for long the mansion's look
> And what we said of it became
>
> A part of what it is...

The mansion is here conceived to be part of an inherited tradition. The poem's elegiac tone is striking. This is the despair arising out of the self's consciousness of its implication in historical process—Stevens might well have written, before Geoffrey Hill, '(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true)'[115] As it is, 'A Postcard From the Volcano' represents an act of temporal ventriloquism into the collective unconscious of future generations of poets:

> Children,
> Still weaving budded aureoles,
> Will speak our speech and never know,
>
> Will say of the mansion that it seems
> As is if he that lived there left behind
> A spirit storming in blank walls,
>
> A dirty house in a gutted world,
> A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
> Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun.[116]

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[115] Geoffrey Hill, 'September Song' in *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 67
[116] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) p. 158

The final three images represent a powerful but ultimately self-defeating projection. It is as if this voice's very consciousness of its own temporality ironically makes it more prone to defeat: these are images of poverty, degradation, and haunting. 'A spirit storming in blank walls' does not convey a sense of articulateness, and the final line introduces a characteristic Stevensian dichotomy; against the self-renewing 'opulence' of nature (or in Dickinson's words, the *real* Haunted House) art makes a poor showing. The poem displays an exemplary modernist pessimism about the poetic consciousness and its context, a pessimism which Dickinson's poem signally lacks. In 'One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -' Dickinson's overwriting and sly dismissal of Gothic convention is one way of *denying* the power of tradition. This is achieved by a substitution of her own (implied) interiority for the ghostly, insubstantial figures of that tradition, making them seem less real. But she does not furnish us with a catalogue or inventory of the attributes of this interior space. By a method directly opposed to that of Stevens in 'A Postcard From the Volcano,' this refusal to name can be seen as a refusal of the burden of tradition and association. Dickinson's poems inhabit the space created by the absence of an originary, Adamic name. For example, one could argue that a poem such as J.311 'It sifts from Leaden Sieves - ' comes into being only by an evasion of the word *snow*; while in a broader sense the poems resist definition by remaining untitled. Decades before Ezra Pound, Emerson was exhorting American poets to 'make it new,' to renew language by naming the world afresh:

> For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry...But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression or naming is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree.[117]

In a sense Dickinson was simply following Emerson's dictum, but in doing so she produced a poetry whose subversiveness he might neither have recognised nor

[117] 'The Poet' in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode / Malcolm Cowley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

approved. The space which her poetry creates both outside and within conventional structures is radically permissive; in effect it brings a pioneering consciousness into being. This could only happen in the absence of authority. That it is a vertiginous step accounts for both the poetry's exhilaration *and* its sense of transgression. The function of Dickinson's poetry in refusing to name is another, vital factor in her significance for poetry of the twentieth century. In her work, the withholding of a name releases possibility, which has repercussions for both a poetry of the self and of nature. For example, in 'I'm ceded - I've stopped being Theirs -' (J.508) naming is felt to be an act of appropriation, even oppression: 'The name They dropped upon my face / With water, in the country church / Is finished using, now'. Here the name itself is portrayed as active: 'Is finished using' and it is by the operation of conscious choice that the speaker is finally actively able to name herself:

> My second Rank - too small the first -
> Crowned - Crowing - on my Father's breast -
> A half unconscious Queen -
> But this time - Adequate - Erect,
> With Will to choose, or to reject,
> And I choose, just a Crown -

A principal choice available to women at this time which involved a change of name would of course have been the choice of a husband, but here something entirely different is signified. The presence of a 'Father' at her baptism might represent either an earthly father whose patronymic she has just received, or a heavenly father whose family she has joined. But with attainment of her 'second Rank' no husband is present. The images are of wholeness and self-sufficiency: 'Called to my Full - The Crescent dropped - / Existence's whole Arc, filled up, / With one small Diadem.' In the poem's second stanza, the reference to a second baptism suggests that this is a religious conversion of some kind: 'Baptized, before, without the choice, / But this time, consciously, of Grace - / Unto supremest name - ' If this is so, the repeated emphasis on choice is puzzling. The fundamental focus in Puritan doctrine is on annihilation of the will, and this is true even of American Puritanism in its covenanted form. The Connecticut Valley Puritan tradition, of which Emily Dickinson's family was a (later) part, upheld the centrality of the five points of the Synod of Dort, which included the principles of innate depravity,

unconditional election, and the irresistibility of grace. But this poem is heretical by any standards—no Puritan saint would claim to possess the 'Will to choose, or to reject.' Moreover, the phrasing of the poem hints that the choice might be of 'Will' itself. When one considers that the poem's opening words 'I'm ceded' can be read not only as a completed action, but as a state of being, or even—most daringly—as a new name, then the poet's stance of rebellion is evident. It is, crucially, the fact of consciousness which makes choice possible.

In the poems which are concerned with naming, consciousness itself is often figured as an attribute which is not hopelessly belated, conferring names on a pre-existent reality, but which partakes of the wonder of that reality and is a constitutive part of it. It is a significant fact that most of the poems which consider the function of names deal also with the subject of nature. The resulting vision is rich in prelapsarian possibility, but, like 'Lightning to the Children eased'[118] explaining it presents a different problem. In the following poem an apparent failure of expression hints at vaster abilities:

> I found the words to every thought
> I ever had - but One -
> And that - defies me -
> As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun
>
> To Races - nurtured in the Dark -
> How would your own - begin?
> Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal -
> Or Noon - in Mazarin?[119]

Here the inability to name proves not that she is lacking in artistry but rather that the content of her consciousness is too glorious, too authentic, for pre-existing expressions. The poem's fifth line has a double function, explaining by analogy how it 'defies' her, but also stating the *impossibility* of explaining her own origins to 'Races - nurtured in the Dark -' The artificial pigments of cochineal and mazarin are too conventional and belated to capture the originary blaze and noon which are her own.

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[118] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 506
[119] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 284

Similarly, in the remarkable 'Bloom upon the Mountain - stated -' (J.667) perception and articulation are so closely related as to be identical, and under such circumstances, names become irrelevant:

> Bloom upon the Mountain - stated -
> Blameless of a Name -
> Efflorescence of a Sunset -
> Reproduced - the same -
>
> Seed, had I, my Purple Sowing
> Should endow the Day -
> Not a Tropic of a Twilight -
> Show itself away -
>
> Who for tilling - to the Mountain
> Come, and disappear -
> Whose be Her Renown, or fading,
> Witness, is not here -
>
> While I state - the Solemn Petals,
> Far as North - and East,
> Far as South and West - expanding -
> Culminate - in Rest -
>
> And the Mountain to the Evening
> Fits His Countenance -
> Indicating, by no Muscle -
> The Experience -[120]

To try to unpack this poem is almost to do violence to its theme of delicate fusion. Dickinson seems to point to the underlying identity of blossoming and stating. The gentle confusion of the first stanza reinforces this, as the sunset is also described as an 'efflorescence' and it is unclear whether the initial 'Bloom' refers to real flowers or to the visual effect of the sunset on the mountain. Both the bloom and the sunset are simultaneously 'Reproduced' and 'the same.' This merging of identities indicates a very definite attitude to language. Names create distinction, disclosing the fissure between language and that which it describes. The poem seems to be working to solder up that rift.[121] If we take the first stanza to describe an observed scene, in the second the poet imagines possessing a 'Seed' which would enable her to 'endow the Day' in similar subtle fashion. This indicates a bequest of some kind (to the

[120] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 331

reader?) as well as a quality of innate enrichment. I take the next lines to involve a conflation of 'give itself away' and 'show itself' meaning that the poet's articulation would both cover/replace reality, not countenancing decline, *and* that this blooming will remain unwitnessed. 'Tilling' implies the cultivation of the initial seed, the development of her conception, while 'Renown, or fading' echoes the action of both flowers and sunset. But in the last line of the third stanza, the change of tense, 'Witness, *is* not here -' hints that in fact this transformation has either already taken place or is in the process of unfolding before our eyes. The fourth stanza confirms this, with an impression of infinite expansion: 'While I state - the Solemn petals,/ Far as North - and East,/ Far as South and West - expanding -/ Culminate - in Rest -' It is almost as if the 'Solemn Petals' are represented by the words North, East, South and West, the co-ordinates of the poem which make or map a mountain. 'While I state' indicates that the expansion is taking place in the 'real time' of the poem's enunciation, referring either to that enunciation itself, or to the alteration of the scene before the poet as she writes. Tellingly, the mountain is here presented as female, in contrast to the end of the poem. The mountain is another vast impregnable structure or space similar to those we have already examined. It clearly surpasses the narrow significance conferred by a name. The meditative quality of the poem conveys a sense of holiness, as does the idea of culmination in rest—this is a Christian notion, as well as signifying the naturalness and ease of the poem's own cessation. The reference to 'Rest' in the final line of this stanza is thus in keeping with the closing lines of the poem:

> And the Mountain to the Evening
> Fits His Countenance -
> Indicating, by no Muscle -
> The Experience -

As the sunset and the bloom of the first stanza were indistinguishable, so the mountain (as night comes on, presumably) merges with the sky. The ease with which this happens highlights Dickinson's use, throughout the poem, of the notion of stasis. 'State' shares the same etymological meaning as 'static.' The poem's mesmeric

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[121] Cf. The threat that such non-differentiation or 'indifference' poses in Plath's poetry, in Chapter 4.

rhythm and very regular tetrameter/trimeter pattern serve to intensify the overwhelming atmosphere of calm. In this poem, to 'state' does not seem to signify articulation or saying in any conventional sense. Rather, it is something which happens as simply and quietly as any natural process. This poem attempts to mimic the fundamental muteness of nature itself. In effect it is a demonstration of Dickinson's statement that 'Beauty - be not caused - It Is -.'[122] The poem also casts in a new light the centrality of *reticence* in some of the other poems I have examined, where it is dramatised as a superior withholding, and expression itself is seen as a barely-to-be-endured publication of interior value. In 'Bloom upon the Mountain - stated' reticence functions as a kind of ethic or basic aesthetic truth. As with 'Like Eyes that looked on Wastes -' the notion of agency has been evacuated, except that here it has been replaced by a blissful merging of the voice with what it describes. In my view the incredible formal and cognitive originality of this poem is a direct consequence of its being 'Blameless of a Name -', which makes it radically experiential, as virtually all of Dickinson's best poetry is. The new territory which it charts permits tremendous descriptive mobility and a fertile blurring of boundaries, mirrored at the level of grammar and syntax.

The key use of 'Blameless' again hints at a transgression, as though to be fixed, to possess an identity, is to be considered culpable. If, as is my suggestion, these poems body forth an area of potentiality, a wholly other order, then it is a space lacking in conventional notions of risk and culpability. The fact that this condition may also involve fear and confusion, a total absence of reassurance or 'law and order,' makes it strikingly similar to Julia Kristeva's description of a literature of 'abjection.'[123] Significantly, Kristeva states that it is in the absence of a strongly prohibitive paternal and *naming* authority that the abject becomes most visible. The abject represents a subject under threat, a structure whose boundaries are menaced by imminent collapse, a self who is on the verge of being engulfed. In the sense that abjection involves a crossing of borders (the failure to maintain a distinct identity, or the fear of that failure) it is a fundamentally *transgressive* discourse. Kristeva clearly

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[122] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 252

[123] To regard Emily Dickinson as a 'borderline case' would obviously be unhelpful, and at any rate, Kristeva's own method is to identify examples of abjection from writing and culture in a wider sense; her purpose in examining 'abject' texts (principally those of Celine) is not to diagnose a psychopathology in their authors.

identifies the abject in modern experimental or avant-garde writing and generalises further:

> Writing causes the subject who ventures in it to confront an archaic authority, *on the nether side of the proper Name*. The maternal connotations of this authority never escaped great writers, no more than the coming face to face with what we have called abjection. From 'I am Madame Bovary' to Molly's monologue and to Celine's emotion, which does injury to syntax before opening on to music, the ballerina, or nothing.[124] [italics added]

For Kristeva, writing or verbalisation represents the self's achievement of a provisional structuration in the face of this fearful and archaic maternal threat. A self is constituted by means of language; a style is produced. In one telling analogy, Kristeva describes the borderline self as 'an empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts— 'powerless' outside, 'impossible' inside.'[125] Although in using this insight one should be wary of the Kristevan emphasis on passivity and unconscious process, one might say that while—for us—Dickinson's voice haunts patriarchal structures, her own figure of the Haunted House is inherently and explicitly subversive. A house, as well as implying a domestic, feminine space, is a symbol of impregnable inherited security. But a haunted house is one whose borders have been (often invisibly) crossed, a space which is inhabited by an unquantifiable Other. The poems I have examined thus far gain their power by suggesting or demonstrating that the interior of these structures (whether 'self' or poem, and the two are often coterminous) has suffered a sea-change, a radical shift which in itself has power to alter the shape of things. However it would be wrong to make psychoanalytic suppositions on this basis. Even in a poem which portrays a self menaced by the dissolution of structure, as in 'I started Early -Took my Dog -' (J.520) it is necessary to remember that it is the poet herself who has the power to confer or withhold a name for the experience she describes. In this poem the self is again exposed and out of doors, and the security provided by structure is ostensibly absent:

I started Early - Took my Dog -

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[124] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* tr. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p.75

[125] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 45

And visited the Sea -
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me -

And Frigates - in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands -
Presuming Me to be a Mouse -
Aground - upon the Sands -

But no Man moved Me - Till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe -
And past my Apron - and My Belt
And past my Bodice - too -

And made as He would eat me up -
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve -
And then - I started - too -

And He - He followed - close behind -
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle - Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl -

Until We met the Solid Town -
No One He seemed to know -
And bowing - with a Mighty look -
At me - The Sea withdrew -[126]

The subversiveness of this poem is largely an outcome of its tone, which gives it all the surface naïveté of a fairy-tale. Its content also owes something to traditional cautionary tales; in this poem, as in so many fairy stories, a young girl barely manages to escape with her innocence intact. The narrative of the poem unfolds around an extended pun on the word 'started.' In the first stanza, the speaker of her own volition starts on an apparently innocent journey. The mermaids and the frigates who take her to be a mouse, affirming both her diminutive stature and her innocence, are the plausible inhabitants of nursery stories. The sea is described with verisimilitude: the 'Frigates - in the Upper Floor' give the impression, as ships do when viewed from shore, of being suspended on the horizon. From the speaker's vantage point the sea appears flat and lacking in perspective. But with the third stanza a threat begins to disturb the idyll: 'But no Man moved me - Till the Tide' here 'moved' can have both an emotional and a literal sense—the speaker feels

[126] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 254

herself displaced in actuality by the rising tide. That the Tide is characterised as male suggests that this narrative describes an awakening sexuality, but in other respects (particularly if we recall the Kristevan abject) the sea would seem to pose a curiously *feminine* threat. Ostensibly at least, the fear is not of penetration, but of engulfment. In structural terms, it is interesting to note that the rising tide remains unnoticed until almost the middle of the poem, after which its encroachment becomes steadily more menacing. The drama of encroachment is achieved by a sequential listing of attributes: shoe, apron, belt and bodice. That the scene resembles a seduction is clear, one is even reminded—unlikely though it might seem—of such 'striptease' poems as Donne's 'To His Mistris Going to Bed' or Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', with their lists of shed clothing or (in Plath's case) parts of the self.

In stanza four the speaker is at pains to reiterate her innocence. There is a naïve, almost pantomime orality about the lines 'And made as He would eat me up - / As wholly as a Dew / Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve - ' with the etymology of 'Dandelion'[127] serving to enforce the theme of consumption, or even subsumption, since a drop of dew is identical in substance to the sea.[128] The fear here is of an utter loss of individuality. In this a comparison can be drawn with Plath's poem 'Medusa', which I discuss in some detail below. The overriding fear in Plath's case is being subsumed back into the maternal space. A second meaning of 'started' appears in this stanza, when the speaker is *startled* into starting anew for safe territory and this use of the word shows her to be rather belatedly reacting to events instead of initiating them (starting early) as she did in the first stanza. The sea, in hot pursuit, exhibits seductive qualities: his 'Silver' and 'Pearl,' contrasting strongly with the speaker's simple, even puritanical attire. The identity of the 'Solid Town' remains a mystery, as it seems to lack a name, its primary feature being its solidity. One thinks again of those reassuringly solid citizens, the Teutonic villagers of Grimm's tales.

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[127] The Chambers Dictionary defines 'dandelion' as 'a common yellow-flowered composite (*Taraxacum Officinale*) with jagged-toothed leaves,' confirming its etymology from the French '*dent de lion*' or 'lion-tooth'. (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Ltd., 1998)

[128] The theme of orality is of course another common feature of fairytale narratives, as Marina Warner has noted: 'The climactic image of 'Red Riding Hood', the wolf's mouth, has led many commentators to note the emphasis on orality. This orality has been interpreted, by the Freudian Geza Roheim, as an allegory of the child's aggressive feelings towards the mother's breast. But the orality has not been interpreted as revealing another form of maternal nurturance: language or oral knowledge.' *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (London: Chatto & Windus , 1994) p. 182

This is also the first occasion on which a collective noun 'We' has been used in the poem. Does it hint at a union of some kind? The next, densely packed line plays on this idea: 'No One He seemed to know - ' This line can be variously interpreted: 'he seemed to know no one until we met the solid town,' or 'my shoes overflowed with pearl until we met the solid town, where he seemed to know no one.' But Dickinson seems to be punning on 'One' in contrast to the 'We' of the previous line. Singleness is alien to the sea. And might the narrator be hinting that she may also have been 'known' by him?

It is only on closer inspection that the innocence of the speaker becomes less obvious. This is clarified by examining Dickinson's use of the function of *looking* throughout the poem. At the beginning, it is as if the speaker initiates a confrontation with a spectacle in which she is then startled to find herself implicated. The sea becomes a spatial structure with basement and floors—perhaps another kind of haunted house—which the speaker attempts to remain outside of. The mermaids, traditionally temptresses, in turn look at her, and the frigates seem to be extending an invitation with their hands, but she remains unmoved. About the middle of the poem, as I have noted, the tide begins to rise, which heralds a curious turn in the narrative. The description of the sea's incorporation of her person is a strikingly visual one. Furthermore, it is mimed by the text's requirements of the reader, who is also invited to 'take in' her various items of clothing. This prompts a realization that in fact the seduction is being re-enacted and reversed in the telling. The *reader* is being drawn into the space of the text in a way which parallels the experience of the speaker. Deceived by the beginning of the poem into believing this to be a 'safe' tale, one is suddenly out of one's depth as the narrative's surface structure begins to dissolve. Indeed, this may explain why the poem uses an image of engulfment to describe a sexual threat which is otherwise explicitly defined as masculine. The threat of engulfment is a threat the narrative itself poses. As readers, we pursue the text with our eyes, but are abruptly halted upon reaching the 'Solid Town' when capitalisation again imposes materiality. The words appear solid (as with the 'Neighbours and the Sun' of J.822), and the reader is denied a satisfactory conclusion to the narrative, which withdraws as effectively as the sea it describes. This raises the question of whether, in the end, the 'Mighty look' is not the speaker's own. It is patently clear that is a poem with designs on its readers. It has *become* what it ostensibly

describes—an apparently innocent narrative has revealed its structural depth, has imposed its own orality (its power of telling) upon that which seemed to threaten it. It can be said that the dissolution of structure dramatised by the poem also represents a collapsing of the boundaries between 'interior' and 'exterior' space. This comment by Gaston Bachelard is a useful comment on the movement of consciousness within the poem: 'being is alternately condensation that disperses with a burst, and dispersion that flows back to a center. Outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility.'[129] Here, however, the crucial point is that while the speaker has not forfeited the appearance of innocence, her control of the situation is clear. Throughout this poem the possible dissolution of structure, a seeming menace, is in fact ably stage-managed by the speaker. Also, unlike the cautionary third person narration of many fairy tales, this is a first hand account of peril. The speaker has survived to tell her own tale, and the tools of narrative interpretation and distortion are at *her* disposal, conferring upon her a power demonstrated by the text's manipulation of the reader.

I have demonstrated the ways in which Dickinson employs images of structure and spatiality to accommodate a consciousness which is becoming aware of its own status. One other important way in which this consciousness is able to reach articulation is through its occupation of extreme spaces. To say that Dickinson was much possessed by death is to state a truism. Barton Levi St. Armand (among others) has shown this to be a conventional enough preoccupation for Dickinson's many contemporaries writing in a Victorian tradition of sentimental verse.[130] Dickinson's obsessive return to the subject can be explained in part by the Puritan belief that the physical attitude of an individual at the moment of their death could give some clue as to whether they had been saved. This helps to explain the plaintive request occasionally made by Dickinson in her letters to know whether an acquaintance had been 'willing to die.'[131] It might also account for the fascinated and minute detail with which she describes a corpse in such poems as 'I've seen a Dying Eye' (J.547), 'She lay as if at play' (J.369) or 'Twas warm - at first - like Us -' (J.

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[129] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 217-218.
[130] See Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and her Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
[131] Dickinson, *Letters*, p. 112

519). But it does not adequately explain the almost sacrilegious effect of some of her most celebrated poems on the subject. One of the better known of these is J.465:

> I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
> The Stillness in the Room
> Was like the Stillness in the Air -
> Between the Heaves of Storm -
>
> The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
> And Breaths were gathering firm
> For that last Onset - when the King
> Be witnessed - in the Room -
>
> I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
> What portion of me be
> Assignable - and then it was
> There interposed a Fly -
>
> With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
> Between the light - and me -
> And then the Windows failed - and then
> I could not see to see -

A significant function of this poem (as well as the many others which Dickinson wrote on the subject of death) is that it requires both poet and reader to go to imaginative extremes. To imagine a corpse speaking is a reductive and gothic interpretation of Wordsworth's famous adage that poetry 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'[132] For many of Dickinson's speakers, the repose necessary to composition is the ultimate repose. The persistence of *voice* into this arena furnishes, for us, a curious retrospective criticism of Poe's notorious statement: 'the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.'[133] Indeed Dickinson herself might almost have written a deliberate riposte to this in her letter of 1874: 'I thought that being a Poem one's self precluded the writing Poems, but perceive the mistake...'[134] These poems share with the others I have examined an idea that a profound and irrevocable shift in perspective has occurred, but they also refuse to disclose the exact nature of this

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[132] William Wordsworth, from Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 168

[133] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', in David Galloway ed., *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 486.

[134] Letter to Higginson, late May 1874 in Dickinson, *Letters*. p. 525

experience. The location of so many of these poems on the outer limits of perception suggests a kind of *testing* of the imaginative faculty. The space in which they occur is an internal frontier, and it is the same kind of space as that found in 'Like Eyes that looked on Wastes-' or 'One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -' in that it permits a startling freedom from convention and constraint. For Dickinson, analysis of a death-bed scene may have begun as a sanctioned activity, but it seems to have prompted a *reductio ad absurdum,* a imaginative literalism so extreme as to become outrageous. Such poems (and I would include in this two of her most famous poems on similar subjects, J.280 and J. 510) are thus similarly representative of the inner revolution which I have identified as central to Dickinson's work. Possible interpretations of the above poem are manifold, and it is a measure of the poem's success that it manages to simultaneously hold itself open to those readings *and* hold them at bay. The means by which it achieves this irreducible quality, which is almost a hollowness or blankness, are worth examining.

Understanding is helped by considering that the poem may deal explicitly with the subversion or deferral of revelation. In this it bears a relationship to the enigmatic couplet of J.685: 'Not 'Revelation' - 'tis - that waits, / But our unfurnished eyes -' where the isolation of the word in inverted commas introduces a scepticism by attempting to simultaneously isolate—and thus partially erase—previously accepted notions of what revelation is. In J.465 we are left in a state of unresolved doubt by the poem's failure to clarify whether revelation has in fact occurred (if the Fly is 'the King') or whether it is about to occur just as the poem breaks off. As the poem describes the precision and correctness with which the death bed scene is being managed, the sense of elaborate preparation contributes to a mounting suspense: 'The Eyes around - had wrung them dry - / And Breaths were gathering firm'. The impression here is of the onlookers holding their breaths in anticipation of the logical outcome of these procedures: 'that last Onset - when the King / Be witnessed - in the Room -' where Christ will appear at the final death agony. But there is (almost literally) a fly in the ointment. The synesthaesia which results when a fly interrupts proceedings 'With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -' is reminiscent of 'I watched the Moon around the House' (J.629), where the Moon's 'advantage' is described as 'Blue' and the word possesses an impenetrable but alluring blankness, signifying the moon's effortless transcendence of the speaker's

understanding. Here, the word functions similarly; the blue has a comprehensive but blank quality, it seems to devour both visual and auditory perception. It represents a disruption of *form*, a complete subversion of expectation. It is at this point that the possibilities begin to proliferate. Does this narrative describe the death of an unregenerate individual, and in that case does the fly represent Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, who has arrived instead of the expected 'King'? Is the fly a symbol of putrefaction? Is it a metaphorical description of the physical sensation of dying? Does it describe a mechanism of helpless and terrified fixation on irrelevant detail at a time of overwhelming anxiety? Or is it exerting a mesmeric influence over the speaker and indefinitely postponing the moment of death, like Poe's M. Valdemar? It is difficult and perhaps wrong to prioritise one interpretation when the poem itself subverts the idea of conclusion. Like 'This Consciousness that is aware' the poem takes place in the interval between one state and another, figured as the calm 'Between the Heaves of Storm - '. Cameron has described the failure of vision in the poem's final two lines as 'brilliant in their underlining of the poem's central premise; namely that death is survived by perception, for in these lines we are told that there are two senses of vision, one of which remains to see and document the speaker's own blindness.'[135] While it seems to be true that many of Dickinson's poems document the failure or inability of a consciousness to imagine its own extinction (which is not necessarily the same thing as an unquestioning faith in an afterlife), here the survival of consciousness seems to be an implicit outcome, rather than the poem's 'central premise.' Cameron's interpretation of the final line 'I could not see to see -' as the death of imperfect vision has Keatsian or biblical overtones.[136] But if this is the case, why is the revelation not made to the reader also? On reading the poem, the one question with which a reader is left is, 'what happened next?' But the poem firmly declines to answer. In my view, the fly's revelation—or the failure thereof—has more to do with the poem's location on the edge of what can be imagined. In the conceptual space opened up by the poem, what happens is not the

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[135] Cameron, *Lyric Time*, p.115

[136] In Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' the imaginative faculty compensates for the failure of bodily vision: 'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,/ not what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,/ But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet/ wherewith the seasonable month endows/ the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;' etc., whereas I.Corinthians 13.12 locates this correction of vision in a new life: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'

conventional, expected revelation anticipated by those slightly absurd deathbed companions. While the interruption by the fly spoils the serenity of the scene and is the last thing anybody would have expected, it is the entire focus of the speaker's recollection, as a consideration of the poem's opening line reminds us. Dickinson's fly is an early harbinger of those Modernist works which are explicitly concerned with the self's inability to sustain belief and the consequent failure of vision. The 'uncertain stumbling Buzz -' hints at an underlying irrationality and is uncannily prescient of the intolerable repetitious buzzing endured by the Mouth in Beckett's *Not I*. (So many of Beckett's late characters could also be described as Dickinsonian haunted houses in which consciousness itself is the haunter.) 'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -' can be seen as a very early instance of absurdist comedy. The comedy arises from the disproportionately large gap between expectation (of revelation) and fulfilment (the fly). But this is a joke perpetrated on the reader. The poem *does* imply that its speaker has survived death and could tell us more if she chose. But, like the death-bed watchers, we are simply abandoned on the brink of revelation with a buzzing in our ears.

'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -' also involves a refusal of definition, and consequently of closure. A consciousness which situates itself on the brink of death *should* be a consciousness which sees all. But Dickinson's narrative is retrospective, looking back towards a reader who is forever trying to catch up. That this endeavour is hopeless is shown by the implied breakdown of vision at the end of the poem. This failure has profound resonance for a modern reader. The 'interval' of the poem reveals nothing but a vacancy, and in this it resembles that other canonical modernist text, *Waiting for Godot*, in that its action takes place during an interval which we are forced to accept as a whole. Dickinson's 'modernism' resides in her attitude towards revelation, an attitude which goes to the silent heart of her work. But this attitude also diverges in significant ways from modernism's despair at a lost centre. As I have shown, the excited tone of these poems, their sense of exhilarated discovery, hints not that the centre is absent, but that it has been relocated. A reading of Dickinson shows her to be the embodiment of Miller's late Puritan, for whom 'truth hath no confines'[137]. Her work posits boundlessness as a characteristic of the self.

[137] Miller, *Nature's Nation*, p. 220

Dickinson's conception of interior space and of (even ostensibly violated) structure, as well as her imaginative colonisation of extremes, above all demonstrate the mastery of a consciousness busy constructing itself out of 'ordinary Meanings - And Attar so immense.'[138] Her characteristic reticence and economy can most usefully be seen as a willed withholding, a resistance to compromise on any front. But the poems create the conceptual space in which an exemplary consciousness *happens*. That it is a female consciousness may not, in the long run, be the most important thing about it, but it was surely a most inspiring fact for those women writers who appeared in its immediate wake.

[138] Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, p. 215

Chapter Three

'This Walled-in Space was a World:' Consciousness and the Crucible of War in H.D.'s Early Lyrics

As in the previous chapter, a crucial emphasis in my argument here will be on the historical/cultural milieu occupied by H.D., from which her work can be said to have emerged. An understanding of its context is an important tool with which to situate her writing and to unravel some of its major premises. As is the case with Dickinson, the recognition of specific influences may help to mitigate the pervasive (and psychoanalysis-influenced) madwoman-in-the-attic school of critical opinion. Such prejudices are difficult to uproot partly because, like all labels, they appear to nullify the requirement for further speculation and represent a kind of critical convenience. My argument in this chapter is that H.D. should be seen as a major war poet, and that this identity was something she struggled with throughout the course of her writing life. The gender implications of this are clear—that a non-combatant woman should regard her opinions on the First and Second World Wars as significant was at best a controversial idea, as Virginia Woolf was well aware when she wrote *Three Guineas*. H.D. shows herself to be acutely conscious of this fact, but equally unwilling to shirk what she appears to have regarded as a moral responsibility: the attempt, as a creative person, to find an adequate response to the first bloodstained half of the twentieth century. H.D.'s acute awareness of history is therefore an important theme of this chapter. I shall be examining both her poetry and prose, since her struggle with problem of history took place in both these arenas; the more historically implicated prose narratives cast light on the mythic intensities of the poetry, and vice versa. H.D. is known to have read and admired Dickinson, and in my view she can be shown to grapple with the specific legacies bequeathed by the earlier writer throughout the course of her career. From the most ostensibly 'Dickinsonian' of her lyric poems in *Sea Garden*, to the later realization of a similar space of consciousness and possibility (albeit by means of mythic resources), in *Helen in Egypt,* H.D. also poses the question of how consciousness responds to the breakdown of social and religious authority, to the frightening necessities of a new and violent century. The narrative of this chapter then, proceeds from an examination of specific historical and cultural realities to the interior space

of H.D.'s writing, in order to show how her late epic *Helen in Egypt* represents the triumphant emergence of poetic consciousness in and through spatial metaphor.

H.D.'s writing shows an acute awareness of her pioneer status among the other Modernist writers of her day. Her consciousness of this seems only to have deepened over time, as her fiction and poetry incorporate this special awareness which was to come to triumphant fruition in the achieved work of her maturity: *Trilogy*, *The Gift*, and *Helen in Egypt.* This section of the thesis will examine the vital matrix of H.D.'s work, the 'crucible' of war which gave it its moral impetus and force, and aided the 'turn' or shift of emphasis away from the early 'crystalline' lyrics with their uncontaminated aestheticism, to the delineation of a unique, utopian realm of consciousness which closely allies her with Emily Dickinson. This chapter is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the entirety of H.D.'s development,[1] but to examine the trajectory of her writing career through an engagement with several key texts. I shall first examine H.D.'s first published collection, *Sea Garden*, (the most typically 'Imagist' collection she wrote) analysing its significance in the light of her later *roman à clef Bid Me To Live*, a work which provides a retrospective gloss for *Sea Garden*, and can be seen as a commentary on the circumstances of its composition.

In his essay 'What Is Minor Poetry?' T.S. Eliot proposes a tentative definition: 'though it is not only the minor poets who are represented in anthologies, we may think of the minor poets as those whom we only read in anthologies.'[2] Although the 'we' to whom Eliot refers is the somewhat shadowy figure of the 'lover of poetry'—and Eliot seems to experience difficulties with accurately characterizing this ideal figure throughout the essay—he is at pains to point out that 'minor' is not necessarily a pejorative term. In H.D.'s case, her status as a minor writer would seem to have been secure from the publication of *Sea Garden* in 1916. The Imagist habit of strategic anthologizing[3] was both a boon and a curse for H.D.; it secured her a place among important male contemporaries such as Pound, Joyce, Aldington and Lawrence, but it also (and especially after the publication of her next

[1] A number of comprehensive studies of this nature already exist, the most thorough of which are Susan Stanford Friedman's *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, and H.D.'s Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), both key reference works for this chapter.

[2] T.S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p.44

two critically unsuccessful volumes *Hymen* and *Heliodora*) consigned her to a decorative ghetto as the Imagist's Imagist. Until the academic revival of interest in H.D. in the 1980s, she was remembered principally through classic anthology pieces like 'Oread' and 'Helen'. But as Eliot states later in the same essay: 'I should say then that there is a kind of orthodoxy about the relative greatness and importance of our poets, though there are very few reputations which remain completely constant from one generation to another. No poetic reputation ever remains exactly in the same place: it is a stock market in constant fluctuation.'[4] In H.D.'s case, the influence of feminist theory has helped make her project, which Friedman, referring specifically to *The Gift*, called her 'Moravian gynopoetic,'[5] visible as never before, and her stock has consequently risen, although a great deal still remains unpublished or unavailable.

Much has been written about the short-lived Imagist experiment and H.D.'s part in it. Hugh Kenner dates Imagism from mid-1912 to mid-1913 and remarks that it was essentially 'a name coined to describe the quality of H.D.'s verse.'[6] Richard Aldington's 1941 memoir *Life For Life's Sake* confirms this fact. He writes with characteristic satire about the foundational moment, noting that, like many of their compatriots, H.D. and Pound had developed 'an almost insane relish' for afternoon tea: 'thus it came about that most of our meetings took place in the rather prissy milieu of some infernal bun-shop full of English spinsters.'[7] On one occasion, Aldington and H.D. having been summoned to a bun-shop in Kensington, Pound 'removed his pince-nez and informed us that we were Imagists.'[8] H.D.'s own recollection of events places them in the tea room of the British Museum: '"but Dryad," (in the Museum tea room), "this is poetry." He slashed with a pencil. "Cut this out, shorten this line. 'Hermes of the Ways' is a good title. I'll send this to Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I'll type it when I get back. Will this do?" And he scrawled "H.D. Imagiste" at the

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[3] *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* ed. Ezra Pound (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1914); *Some Imagist Poets*, ed. Amy Lowell (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915, 1916, and 1917).
[4] Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*., p. 48
[5] Friedman, *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity and H.D.'s Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 351
[6] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Pimlico, 1991), p.174
[7] Richard Aldington, *Life For Life's Sake* (New York: Viking Press, 1941; London: Cassell, 1968), p.122
[8] Aldington, *Life For Life's Sake*, p. 122

bottom of the page.'[9] Or again, 'I was 21 when Ezra left [the U.S.] and it was some years later that he scratched "H.D. Imagiste," in London, in the Museum tea room, at the bottom of a typed sheet, now slashed with his creative pencil, "cut this out, shorten this line."'[10] Kenner's dating is hardly accurate, but serves his purpose in portraying Imagism as Ezra Pound's invention.

In *Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917*, J.B. Harmer locates the inception of Imagism in T.E. Hulme's 1909 Bergsonian table talk in the Café Tour d'Eiffel, witnessed by Padraic Colum, F.S. Flint, and Ezra Pound, among others. Pound seems to have been anxious to insist he had learned little of value from these discussions, although Harmer states, 'it could be that [Hulme's] impact on Pound's imagination was far greater than the American would allow himself to realize...a whole range of experiences seems to have urged Pound to his new formulation: his travels, his conversations with Yeats and Hueffer, the example of the poems of H.D. and Aldington, the French writers he was hearing about from Flint and—it may be—the remembered enunciations of Hulme. A simple notion of linear cause and effect cannot apply to something so complex as a literary development.'[11] Pound published 'The Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme' in *The New Age* in January 1912 and subsequently in his own volume *Ripostes*, by which time Hulme seems to have given up on poetry. Harmer quotes him as saying 'I could have written more poems but I don't want to write poems. I'm going to be a philosopher, a heavy philosopher.'[12] In the event, Hulme became yet another casualty of the First World War. Aldington is inclined to credit Pound with inventing the movement on a whim: 'My own belief is that the name took Ezra's fancy, and that he kept it *in petto* for the right occasion. If there were no Imagists, obviously they would have to be invented. Whenever Ezra has launched a new movement—and he has made such a hobby of it that I always expect to find one day that Pound and Mussolini are really one and the same person—he has never had any difficulty about finding members. He just called on his friends.'[13] Aldington nevertheless confirms that the three poems by H.D. that appeared in the Spring 1913 edition of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* were the first anywhere to bear the Imagist label. He continues, 'I think this

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[9] H.D., *End to Torment* (New York: New Directions Press, 1979), p. 18
[10] H.D., *End to Torment,* p. 40
[11] J.B. Harmer *Victory in Limbo: Imagism 1908-1917* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), pp. 35-36
[12] Harmer, *Victory in Limbo*, p. 54
[13] Aldington, *Life For Life's Sake*, p. 123

fact...lends considerable support to those who say the Imagist movement was H.D. and H.D. the Imagist movement.'[14] The subsequent faction-ridden history of Imagism (the movement) with Pound and Wyndham Lewis' macho Vorticism on the one hand, and Amy Lowell's disaffected 'Amygists' or 'nagistes'[15] on the other, is well-documented, but the relationship between Pound and H.D. in its foundation is of most interest here. Pound was H.D.'s earliest impresario, occupying a position remarkably similar to Higginson in the case of Dickinson and Ted Hughes in the case of Plath. Diana Collecott, in her detailed study of H.D., emphasises Pound's controlling role in the creation of 'H.D.'

> By scrawling 'H.D., Imagiste' on the manuscript of her earliest poems, Pound had identified not only her poetry, but her poetic persona, as his product. To the end of her life, Hilda Aldington's fascination with, and resistance to, this identity is inscribed in her writing. In both the prose and the poetry can be found the scars of a double confinement: the bringing to birth of a poet that was also a restriction on her freedom to write.[16]

Collecott also notes H.D.'s irritation with her 'perfect' image, quoting her 1927 letter to her friend Viola Jordan: 'I say who is H.D.? They all think they know more about what and why she should or should not be or do than I.'[17] The way in which a *nom de plume* (or *nom de guerre*, as she was to call it in *Palimpsest*) takes on a life of its own forms an important part of H.D.'s project of poetic self-fashioning. Largely as a result of strong editorial intervention on the part of influential men—Higginson and Hughes—both Dickinson and Plath's personae posthumously outgrew their 'actual' identities; in Plath's case almost wholly, since she was not well-known as a poet before her death,[18] but with Dickinson in a more qualified way, since, as I have shown, she effectively covered her tracks by seeking anonymity, yet played constantly and obsessively with the notion of identity in her work. H.D. lived to witness the manifold meanings which attached themselves to her name. But there is no doubt that the label of the 'perfect' Imagist grew

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[14] Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake*, pp. 123-124

[15] Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and her World* (London: Collins, 1985), p. 62 This soubriquet arises from an episode which is reputed to have happened during one of Amy Lowell's elaborate dinners for her fellow Imagists in London, during which Pound apparently deposited a tin bath on the dinner table and proposed 'nagistes' as a suitable title for a Lowell-led literary movement.

[16] Diana Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.138

[17] H.D., letter to Viola Jordan, quoted in Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism,* p.135

burdensome, especially as it seems to have prevented her from gaining the approval of her peers for her later experimental prose fictions and poetry. Pound was of the opinion that women could never be artistic innovators and that H.D. should have stuck safely to what she knew best. He was especially disapproving of her interest in psychoanalysis, although this may almost certainly have had to do with his inveterate anti-Semitism: 'I can't blow everybodies' noses for 'em. Have felt yr / vile Freud all bunk / but the silly Xristers bury all their good authors /...instead of sticking to reading list left by Dante / ...you got into the wrong pig stye, ma chere. But not too late to climb out.'[19] Despite the cruel portrait of Elizabeth Winterbourne in *Death of a Hero* and his unjust treatment of her during their marriage, Aldington would seem to have been anxious to preserve an idealised version of H.D.; certainly this is indicated by his letters and memoir, where he writes:

> I would say of H.D. that she was more distinguished (to use one of Yeats's favourite adjectives) than Ezra, both as a person and as a mind. I have never known anybody, not even Lawrence, with so vivid an aesthetic apprehension...To look at beautiful things with H.D. is a remarkable experience. She has a genius for appreciation, a severe but wholly positive taste. She lives on the heights, and never wastes time on what is inferior or in finding fault with masterpieces. She responds so swiftly, understands so perfectly, re-lives the artist's mood so intensely, that the work of art seems transformed. You too respond, understand, and relive it in a degree which would be impossible without her inspiration...Addington Symonds said that nobody could hope to understand Italian poetry unless he were exceptionally gifted aesthetically. The same is true of H.D.'s poetry. It is the expression of a passionate contemplation of the beautiful, as the young Plato must have felt before Socrates lured him into the fictitious world of abstractions...[20]

The breathless quality of Aldington's appreciation does H.D. no favours. As Barbara Guest writes: 'If that is the sort of praise H.D. had become accustomed to, particularly from her husband, it is no wonder that the goddess legend might lend itself to satire.'[21] The Great War shattered H.D.'s personal and artistic idyll irrevocably. She would spend much of the rest of her career attempting to make sense of its lasting impact on her life and work. As well as its definitive destruction

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[18] See my analysis of Ted Hughes' essays on Sylvia Plath in Chapter Four of this study.

[19] This letter was written to H.D. by Pound from St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1954. It is quoted by Norman Holmes Pearson in his introduction to *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions Press, 1974), xii. Spellings as in the original.

[20] Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake*, p.101

[21] Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 63 In fact, by the time this passage was composed in 1941 H.D. had left her crystalline Imagist style far behind, and was about to embark upon the composition of *The Gift* and *Trilogy*, both fluid and radically associative in form, in war-shattered London.

of all of the old late Victorian certainties and its ushering in of a newer, harder, and more mechanised age, it precipitated the break-up of her marriage to Richard Aldington. H.D. also blamed the still-birth of her daughter by Aldington on the war; this had resulted, she claimed (somewhat histrionically), from having the news of the *Lusitania*'s sinking broken to her in a particularly insensitive fashion.[22] From being 'Les Jeunes', Pound's lighthearted *protégés*, H.D. and her friends in the space of four years became a lost, fragmented, and 'still-born generation.'[23] The character of Raymonde Ransome in *Murex*, the central novella in the *Palimpsest* trilogy, is a fair reflection of H.D.'s situation at this time. The nurses at the lying-in hospital where she loses her baby are cruel, scolding her for making a fuss and using up medical resources when hundreds of young men are being killed or mutilated daily at the front. She feels alienated and guilty: 'As an American, she was not expected to understand.'[24] H.D. links Raymonde's birth contractions with the march of soldiers' feet passing down the street outside: 'That pain and that sound and that rhythm of pain and that rhythm of departure were indissolubly wedded.'[25] The link is a daring one and more complex that it might at first appear. It issues from H.D.'s implicit and consistent critique of war and its attendant propaganda, a deformation of progressive values which she witnessed at first hand on the home front. Guest emphasises that H.D. showed less interest in one of the most burning political issues of her day than, say, her friend and compatriot Marianne Moore: 'She would always be sympathetic and helpful to a particular woman, but toward a "movement," such as the suffragist cause, there is no evidence of her support. There is one story of hers with a suffragist theme, and that may have been written to please an ardent supporter of the cause, May Sinclair.[26] Specifics, not generalities, were her specialty.'[27] Despite the fact that H.D. seems not to have been strongly political, it is unlikely that she failed to register the effect of wartime propaganda on the most ardent suffragists of her day. George Dangerfield, in his classic study of pre-war

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[22] Guest writes: ' There is little likelihood that the sinking of the *Lusitania* caused this miscarriage, but H.D. chose to place her guilt for not wanting the child on an international episode. It was hysterical thinking, but then, the atmosphere lent itself to emotional decisions and hysteria.' Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 73

[23] H.D., *Palimpsest* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois press, 1968), p.117

[24] H.D., *Palimpsest,* p. 141

[25] H.D., *Palimpsest,* p. 145

[26] May Sinclair became, like so many militant suffragettes, an ardent supporter of the war effort.

[27] Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 116

English society, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, describes the impact of the outbreak of international hostilities on the militant women's suffrage movement:

> What would the suffragettes do? How would they behave? Which was the greater enemy—man or Germany? On 11th August, Mr. MacKenna announced that all their sentences would be remitted. His Majesty is confident, said Mr. MacKenna, 'that they can be trusted not to stain the cause they have at heart by any further crime or disorder.' Trusted! Certainly they could be trusted! They turned patriot to a woman...So now those hands which had smashed windows, and lighted the stealthy fuse, and poured jam into letter boxes, gave out white feathers to civilian youths and wounded soldiers in mufti. The mouths which had uttered the extreme language of rebellion now made recruiting speeches. The breasts which had shuddered from the feeding tube, and endured the rough hands of policemen and toughs, now bore a placard 'Intern Them All.'[28]

Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, as might have been expected, threw themselves into the war effort with gusto. Only the estranged Sylvia Pankhurst, ardent Socialist and consequently the *bête noire* of the mainly middle- and upper-class WSPU, spoke out. 'She alone continued to call for the Vote, and to declare that women should stand for peace, not bloodshed.'[29] The wholesale patriotism of such figures demonstrated that they had not freed themselves from patriarchal values as thoroughly as they had supposed. It was a mistake which was to be corrected by Virginia Woolf some years later, remembering the earlier wartime atmosphere as she wrote *Three Guineas* on the brink of another world war.[30] H.D. may have been more interested in specifics than 'generalities,' but these catastrophic energies left nobody unscathed. Like her contemporary Katherine Mansfield she lost a brother in the conflict. Gilbert Doolittle was killed at Thiaucourt shortly after the U.S. joined the war in April 1917, and their father died 'of shock' or grief on hearing the news. H.D. also lamented the loss of Aldington, who was not killed (as Guest writes, 'although there is no doubt that he suffered severe emotional disturbances that would trouble him for years after, the truth seems to be that he never fired a shot.'[31]) but who justified his flagrant infidelities with Dorothy 'Arabella' Yorke by implying that he deserved his small pleasures on home leave because he was risking his life for King and Country at the front. But

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[28] George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Constable & Co., 1936; Serif, 1997), p. 311

[29] Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, p. 311

[30] The irony being that the menace of Hilterism served to justify the cause of a second war in a way very different to that of WWI.

the irony of the nursing-home scene in *Murex* probably has a more specific genesis. It is important to understand the pressures experienced by women during the course of the war in order to grasp fully H.D.'s own complex responses to it. Sharon Ouditt outlines some of these pressures in her study *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War.* Women, of course, took no active part in the war, but suffered 'the guilt of being required to enact the role of the protected, for whom the protectors lost their lives.'[32]

Propaganda which depicted Germans eating babies and raping Belgian virgins fed into and helped reinforce the stereotype of that calm matriarch, Britannia, and encouraged idealistic young men to enlist in order to protect their own mothers and sisters. As Ouditt writes, motherhood was already 'essential to the ideological framework of imperial England,'[33] and during the war this ideology became even more central. Wilfred Owen—who had a very close relationship with his own mother—illustrates this in his poem 'The Kind Ghosts,' in which the nameless 'She' is generally understood to represent Britannia, but could as easily stand for women in general:

> She sleeps on soft, last breaths; but no ghost looms
> Out of the stillness of her palace wall,
> Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms.
>
> She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms,
> Not marvelling why her roses never fall
> Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms.
>
> The shades keep down which well might roam her hall.
> Quiet their blood lies in her crimson rooms
> And she is not afraid of their footfall.
>
> They move not from her tapestries, their pall,
> Nor pace her terraces, their hecatombs,
> Lest aught she be disturbed, or grieved at all.[34]

In the face of wartime propaganda it seems inevitable that non-combatant women should have been resented by the traumatised soldiery. Similar sentiments

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[31] Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 86
[32] Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2
[33] Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*, p. 133
[34] Wilfred Owen: 'The Kind Ghosts' from *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy. (London: Chatto & Windus), 1994, p. 68

can be observed in the writings of Sassoon ('Glory of Women') and in Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*. Graves's account reproduces in full the much-applauded sentiments of the now notorious 'Little Mother' letter addressed to the editor of the *Morning Post*:

> Send the Pacifists to us and we shall very soon show them, and show the world, that in our homes at least there shall be no 'sitting at home warm and cosy in the winter, cool and "comfy" in the summer.' There is only one temperature for the women of the British race, and that is white heat...We women pass on the human ammunition of 'only sons' to fill up the gaps, so that when the 'common soldier' looks back before going 'over the top' he may see the women of the British race at his heels, reliable, dependent, uncomplaining.[35]

In explanation, Graves writes: 'England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language.'[36] Prefacing her discussion of *Bid Me To Live*, Barbara Guest also comments on this reinforced civilian/military and—by extension—gender divide: 'Nurses and soldiers were crossing the Channel back and forth on leave; parties and theaters and marriages occurred, and then deaths within a week of those London celebrations. How many must have gone to their deaths shortly after relaxing with *Chu Chin Chow*, the season's musical hit, so far removed in era, costume, and plot from their lives!'[37] Taking all of this into account, H.D.'s explicit connection of Raymonde's stillbirth with the marching feet of departing soldiers now appears implicitly political. Her own motherhood is blighted, not reinforced. She does not produce a son to feed the war machine and it is perhaps this that provokes the nurses' resentment. Moreover, instead of occupying the privileged, detached perspective of a coddled woman, she is in some sense a participant—she experiences death at first hand, in her own body.[38] War and its opposite, love, remained the dominant themes in H.D.'s work for the rest of her life. She turned her poetry and prose writings into the matter of resistance: resistance to the vast destruction of civilisation she witnessed on two occasions, and to the forces (historical, psychological) which she came to believe underlay militarism.

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[35] Robert Graves: *Goodbye to All That* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 239
[36] Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p. 237
[37] Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 88
[38] It is perhaps significant that H.D.'s own pregnancy was confirmed in August 1914, on the morning of the day Britain declared war on Germany. See Guest, *Herself Defined*, p.73

Sea Garden was published in 1916, in the midst of war. It is deeply rooted in landscape, and possesses the kind of exact, detailed grasp of natural phenomena that H.D. may well have owed to her scientific father and grandfather. The precise location of the poems is a matter of some conjecture. Many of the poems may have been inspired by the Devon and Dorset coasts, where H.D. spent some time with Aldington before he was called up for military service and during the initial phases of his training. Cornwall is unlikely to be the setting, as *Sea Garden* had been published by the time of her stay in Bosigran, Cecil Gray's house, and H.D. was by then working on translations from Euripides. The landscape is a bare, rocky, classical one, convincingly Greek, but Rachel Blau Duplessis is also surely correct in seeing another landscape underlying (palimpsest-wise) *Sea Garden's* environment: 'despite the unstinting Greek contexts and references, it is possible to see...the whole set of lyrics as only coincidentally Greek: the landscapes are American, the emotions are personal, the "Greek" then becomes a conventional but protected projection of private feelings into public meanings.'[39] The metaphorical weight of the 'Greek' in H.D.'s work is a complex matter and has been examined at length elsewhere.[40] But the landscape of *Sea Garden* is for the most part a pagan one, depopulated and denuded of the trappings of the industrial age. The one salient exception to this is 'Cities', the final poem in the collection. It stands as a corrective to the spareness of the preceding poems, and perhaps as an attempt to deflect criticism of the 'escapist' kind which came to be the chief charge against her poetry made by Douglas Bush,[41] although its overall effect would easily lead to just such an imputation. 'Cities' shows itself willing to confront the implications of the contemporary urban space, but leaves the reader in no doubt as to where H.D.'s sympathies lie:

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[39] Rachel Blau Duplessis: *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) p. 14

[40] See especially Eileen Gregory's *Classic Lines: H.D. and Hellenism* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) , which examines H.D.'s attraction to Hellenistic Alexandria rather than a strictly classical or pre-classical Greece, with which she connects H.D.'s fascination for the marginal and fragmentary survivals of the Hellenistic era, as well as the fusion of Greek and Egyptian influences, of central importance in *Helen in Egypt*. Diana Collecott supports the idea that Hellenism functioned as a mask in H.D.'s work, seeing her lifelong negotiations with the Sapphic fragments as a way in which H.D. could examine her own complex sexual identity. There are clear instances of this in *Sea Garden*, especially in those poems (such as 'Pursuit' and 'The Gift') in which the gender of the addressee is unclear. Cassandra Laity has examined H.D.'s Hellenism in the context of that of her late-Victorian forbears, especially Swinburne, in *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[41] Guest remarks on Bush's criticism of H.D.'s evasiveness in his 1963 work Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (New York: Norton, 1963). See Guest, *Herself Defined*, p. 82

And in these dark cells,
packed street after street,
souls live, hideous yet—
O disfigured, defaced,
with no trace of the beauty
men once held so light.[42]

'Cities' is a fable, relating the—spiritual, rather than historical—causes of the physical degradation of the modern city. H.D.'s vision here shares something of the grotesqueness of Eliot's 'unreal city,' the site, if not the source, of spiritual and physical etiolation: 'Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.'[43] H.D. imagines the modern city as a vast hive of innumerable units filled not with honey but with larvae, 'seething life' which disgusts her. As an enclosed space it shares a great deal with the other early spaces in *Sea Garden*, as I explain below. It is also strongly anticipatory of Plath's later use of the hive image in her bee sequence from *Ariel*. The image had enormous personal significance for her, as her father was an entomologist and expert on bees, as was H.D.'s grandfather. For the speaker of 'Cities,' the hive image permits a statement of her own worth, in opposition to the larval 'they' who oppose her and declare:

You are useless. We live.
We await great events.
We are spread through this earth.
We protect our strong race.
You are useless.
Your cell takes the place
Of our young future strength.

In response, the speaker imagines herself as one of a number of survivors of the original order, the original city of mythic beauty:

Can we think a few old cells
were left—we are left—
grains of honey,
old dust of stray pollen
dull on our torn wings,

[42] 'Cities' from *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz, (New York: New Directions Press, 1983) p. 41
[43] T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land': *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 53

we are left to recall the old streets?

It is a typical high modernist gesture: the pullulating masses, the decadent *civitas* which is to be saved by a small cultural élite; such messianic sentiments are to be found in the early work of Pound and Eliot also. The difference, and it is a crucial one, comes towards the end of H.D.'s poem. The speaker's response to the ventriloquised nay saying of the larval majority in lines 61-67 is defiantly positive. 'Is our task the less sweet,' she asks, 'though we wander about, / find no honey of flowers in this waste...?' The final lines of the poem contain an apostrophe that now seems almost a pre-emptive riposte to the despairing Eliot of 'The Waste Land':

The city is peopled
with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:

Though they crowded between
and usurped the kiss of my mouth
their breath was your gift,
their beauty, your life.[44]

In contrast to the horrifying, war casualty ghosts which populate the London of Eliot's imagination,[45] the apostrophised 'turn' of H.D.'s poem addresses the speaker, as if in answer to her own invocation, as 'love.' The premise of the poem is progressive: from the unnamed 'maker' to the citizens who cannot grasp beauty because there is too much of it, but must (*pace* Keats) identify it through its opposite, must 'lift through new growth' slowly and painfully to attain to the original perfection of their own volition. This is a poem that dramatises the ascent or emergence of a new consciousness. It is a fall-of-man narrative, but more in the Platonic than the Judeo-Christian sense, as the 'beauty of temple / and space before temple, / arch upon perfect arch' makes clear. The addressee of the final, italicised apostrophe remains unidentified. Are these stanzas a retort to the cynical and war-hardened subjects the poet observes around her? Perhaps they are a more personal response to Aldington, who resentfully questioned the validity of poetry in a time of war—a question that was to have continuing relevance in the decades to come. In February 1918 Aldington wrote to D.H. Lawrence: 'These human relationships

[44] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 42
[45] These ghosts are reminiscent of the experience of Siegfried Sassoon on leave, recalled by Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*, when he hallucinated the streets of London strewn with the corpses of his comrades.

which now seem so important will, I know, soon become trivial, almost nothing. For...in a short time I shall inevitably be sent to France.' Lawrence's biographer Paul Delany writes of this: 'Lawrence felt only contempt for Aldington's attitude, since his own was precisely the opposite...For Lawrence, the worse it got the more he felt bound to deny it a foothold in his emotions, since for him consciousness meant complicity; not until years afterwards could he speak from the heart of what the war had done to him.'[46]

H.D. was of Lawrence's opinion, but it cost her a great deal of guilt, in view of her marriage to a member of the armed forces. In place of ghosts the poet of 'Cities' sees 'spirits' populating a 'continuing city'—and although she may (she implies) be distracted by their presence, nevertheless they are the source of all vitality possessed by her addressee. Duplessis' theory about the function of H.D.'s Hellenism as a 'poetic mask' and 'encoding of desire'[47] has particular relevance here, as the possible biographical sources for the poem begin to be unpacked. This approach is justified, I would argue, by H.D. herself, who left numerous templates for the decoding of her own artistic motives, compulsively fusing biographical fact and fictional embellishment. In truth H.D.'s *oeuvre* stands as a remarkable reclamation of the 'abject' feminine autobiographical subject from the perversities of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in which he claims: 'the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.'[48] This early essay of Eliot's from *The Sacred Wood* came to represent a gospel-like dogma for most New Critical readers, and as I have explored in my previous chapter, Eliot's dismissal of the 'personal' became a central part of New Critical thinking. But to be fair to Eliot, one must note that the succeeding, rather coy and frequently omitted sentence may shed more light on his motives: 'But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.'[49] In view of the fact that one of the chief charges made against H.D. by her critics was that her work was

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[46] Paul Delany, *D.H. Lawrence's Nightmare: The Writer and His Circle in the Years of the Great War*. (London: Harvester Press, 1979) p. 342

[47] Duplessis, *The Career of That Struggle*, pp. 6, 12

[48] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' from *The Sacred Wood*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1919, 1997), p. 58

'escapist,' her evolving confrontation, in fiction and poetry alike, with the matter of her own consciousness now seems anything but. Cassandra Laity, comments on the poet's oppositional stance in her study of H.D. and the *fin de siècle*:

> ...at least one feminist critic, Alicia Ostriker, has blamed Eliot's 'extinction of personality' and the currently 'popular critical fiction' of 'the death of the author' for the oppression of the feminine "I" in Anglo/American literary modernity. I suggest further that the implicitly or explicitly gender-biased flight from romantic 'selfhood' urged by modern, New Critical, and postmodern critics from Yeats and Eliot to Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, and Roland Barthes may be traced back, in part, to the crisis in sexual definition provoked by the transgressive 'personalities'—female and effeminate male—of the last century.[50]

Laity locates H.D.'s resistance to the dominant male modernisms in her continuing attraction to her late Victorian forbears, in particular to Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites. She continues: 'H.D. resurrected the Decadent femme fatale and the homoerotic male youth, which positioned her, among other things, against New Critical attempts to sheer away feminine "personality" and "superfluity"'[51] This line of argument helps Laity avoid essentialist '*écriture féminine*' charges. However I would argue that there is no need to see H.D.'s approach as necessarily so programmatic a continuation of late Victorian Decadent tropes—rather, she can be shown to be engaged in a process of continual adaptation to the exigencies resulting from her own artistic consciousness. This explains the pioneering stance, the sense of excited discovery, which links her closely to both Dickinson and Plath. It is inextricably linked, I believe, to her sense of opposition and resistance, as a woman, to the rapidly-canonised dominant male modernist line. Thus her work (as Laity also recognises) can in this sense be seen as an ongoing negotiation with and critique of such forces. It is precisely by forging a self or space of consciousness through the work that this is achieved.

Bid Me To Live was written by H.D. at Freud's suggestion, in order to facilitate her recovery from the crippling writing-block of the thirties, and to examine the importance of her relationship with D.H. Lawrence. It also provides, as I have said, a useful retrospective gloss on the circumstances of the composition of *Sea Garden* and her other early poems, a position she will return to more

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[49] Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 58

[50] Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and The Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 185

comprehensively in Book 2 of *Helen in Egypt*, as I argue below. Helen McNeil, in her introduction to the Virago Press edition of the novel, comments on its context: '*Bid Me to Live* locates itself in a triangle formed by art, sex, and war. Literary art is taken seriously; creativity validates personality; the three central characters are writers...The war is the source of temporality and determinism in the narrative of *Bid Me To Live*, a historicity so devastating it is experienced as endlessness: the war will never be over.'[52] The narrative opens in wartime London, the London of 'Cities', where Julia (the H.D. figure) is watching her marriage to Rafe Ashton break down under the strain of his repeated periods of service and leave, and his infidelities with Bella Carter, their glamorous upstairs neighbour. She is nursing a devastating psychic wound caused by the stillbirth of her child (a memory she actively represses) after which a nurse advised her that she should not risk having another child during the war. She is incapable of responding to her husband's sexual advances for this reason and because he has become alien to her, 'he had breathed a taint of poison-gas in her lungs, the first time he had kissed her.'[53] Moreover he tells her accusingly '"You don't feel anything."' In the midst of emotional chaos and the very real threat of death Julia begins to realise that her artistic mission involves making a stand against the prevailing values of the day:

> She must hold the thing; like a tightrope walker, she must move tip-toe across an infinitely narrow thread, a strand, the rope, the umbilical cord, the silver-cord that bound them to that past. The past had been blasted to hell, you might say; already, in 1917, the past was gone. It had been blasted and blighted, the old order was dead, was dying, was being bombed to bits, was no more. But that was not true. Reality lived in the minds of those who had lived before that August... Words that she did not speak held old cities together; on this fine stand, this silver-cord, Venice was a bright glass-bead, certainly a translucent emerald-green, a thing in itself, in itself worth all the misery of the past two years. 1914. Then 1915 and her death, or rather the death of her child. Three weeks in that ghastly nursing-home and then coming back to the same Rafe. Herself different. How could she blithely face what he called love, with that prospect looming ahead and the matron, in her harsh voice, laying a curse on whatever might then have been, "You know you must not have another baby until after the war is over.." Meaning in her language, you must keep away from your husband, keep him away from you.[54]

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[51] Laity, *H.D. and The Victorian Fin de Siècle* p. 185
[52] Helen McNeil, introduction to *Bid Me To Live*, (London: Virago Press), pp. xiii, xiv
[53] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 39
[54] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, pp. 24-25

This is a highly significant passage. As with the speaker of 'Cities,' it is almost impossible to imagine social or psychological continuity through the war. Its effect on the once familiar is catastrophic; she and her husband have become different people in the space of two years. Rafe is on the side of death. His sexuality is linked with death because of the child's stillbirth and the matron's injunction that Julia might die were she to have another baby. He insists that Julia should wear his service watch while he is away, symbolically imprisoning her in the history he is forced to experience: 'he fastened the leather around her wrist, he tightened it with a hard twist, he bent over her hand, secured the strap in the fresh-cut eye-hole..."I don't want it, damn it," he said. "I'm leaving it with you, to give you some idea—"'[55] The constriction of the watch-strap is an image of an imprisoning sexual double-standard, but it may also be linked to the stifling domestic enclosures represented in *Sea Garden*. Rafe's infidelities are not only sexual, but also concern his denial of the value of poetry and his seeming rejection of their pre-war past together. The umbilical cord linking them to the past is significant particularly because it is a female image (in this it is reminiscent of the 'womb-consciousness' of H.D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision,* examined in greater detail in Chapter Four, pp.196-199) and ironic in view of Julia's failure to give birth successfully. The image is expressive of tension and pressure—as though the difficulty of maintaining it were acute. Everything around Julia militates against her inner consciousness and implies that she is wrong, so that holding to her beliefs becomes an infidelity in itself, perhaps even a kind of treason. The description of Venice (or its representation in Julia's consciousness) as 'a thing in itself' and the ascription of value to it for that reason is also important. In my view it is clearly linked to the prevailing aesthetic of *Sea Garden*, where objects in themselves, especially objects of apparent frailty frequently take on a significance beyond that suggested by their appearance. Thus the 'Sea Rose:'

> Rose, harsh rose,
> marred and with stint of petals,
> meagre flower, thin,
> sparse of leaf,
>
> more precious
> than a wet rose

[55] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 29

single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on that sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?[56]

The poem immediately calls to mind the roses of three of H.D.'s romantic forbears, Blake, Keats and Yeats; but whereas Blake's rose is 'sick,' Keats' is 'full of dewy wine' and Yeats' is 'far-off, most secret, and inviolate,' H.D.'s seems to go against the grain. The conventional symbolic appurtenances of the rose—its fragrance, its richness of colour and texture, its mysterious interior—are not to be found here. This rose is redolent of the salt tang and harshness of the sea, rather than the cultivated pleasures of the garden. The poetic/symbolic potential of the rose is profound and of long standing. For Keats and Yeats it represented escape and forgetfulness in erotic reverie; for Blake the sexual innocence of the rose had already gone over into decay, past the point of ripeness. In Yeats' 'The Secret Rose' the 'howling storm' of Blake's poem has been revised into 'thy great wind of love and hate—'[57] an imagined future time when the mythic energies which seduce men 'beyond the stir/ and tumult of defeated dreams'[58] will be transformed into the forces of social and psychological revolution. For Yeats, the source of potential energy was the rose itself, repository of race-memory and personal dream. H.D.'s 'Sea Rose,' on the other hand, appears to be a prey to the powerful natural forces which surround it; it is 'caught', 'flung' and 'lifted' in the motion of sea and wind. It is an anti-rose, characterised by poverty and meagreness. And yet this is not a debased or degraded image, as the poet asserts firmly that the sea rose is 'more precious' and superior in fragrance to the spice-rose. In effect, the poem is an act of reclamation and re-vision similar to the inverted fairy-tale narrative of Dickinson's 'I started early- took my Dog -' which I analysed in the previous chapter. Like her

[56] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 5
[57] W.B. Yeats 'The Secret Rose' in *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992) p. 77
[58] Yeats, 'The Secret Rose' in *Yeats's Poems*, p. 77

compatriot Wallace Stevens, H.D. is aware of the modernist dump of images, but genuinely feels 'the purifying change.'[59]

However, against the pessimism of Stevens' belated aesthetic, H.D. sets the irreducible singleness of her observed rose, changing its character from soft dewiness to vigorous astringency. In doing so she also reclaims the rose as a symbol of gender. Romantic muses are not supposed to be 'meagre,' 'thin,' 'sparse,' or 'stunted.' In addition, this rose does not transcend history—it is 'caught in the drift,' physically implicated in the surrounding processes. Paradoxically, this is what confers value upon it. While the poem can be seen as an example of what Kenner calls Imagism's 'hygiene'—in purging her rose of its conventional associations, H.D. can be said to be faithfully following Pound's injunction to 'make it new'—yet it also, in my view, represents a new kind of authority in poetry. H.D. comes close to Dickinson in her anti-romantic, almost scientific observation. This empirical independence involves—on however small a scale—a striking out, a refusal to assume the burden of continuity with what is, after all, primarily a male literary tradition. If Dickinson' poems work to destroy any conceivable prehistory, in the same way that, for Bachelard, 'on principle, phenomenology liquidates the past and confronts what is new'[60]; then H.D.'s writing attempts something very similar. That the resulting poem is small in scale, 'meagre' like Dickinson's lyrics is both understandable and appropriate (the problem of authoritative form was something H.D. was to grapple with in the published and unpublished work that followed *Sea Garden,* until her decisive formal breakthrough of the 1940s represented by *Trilogy*'s flowing but highly disciplined narrative sections). The Sea Rose's quality of harsh integrity is repeated elsewhere in the collection. In 'Sea Lily,' for example, the poet writes:

> Myrtle-bark
> is flecked from you,
> scales are dashed
> from your stem,
> sand cuts your petal,
> furrows it with hard edge,
> like flint
> on a bright stone.

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[59] Wallace Stevens 'The Man on the Dump' in *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber 1984), p. 202

[60] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxii

Yet though the whole wind
slash at your bark,
you are lifted up,
aye—though it hiss
to cover you with froth.[61]

The resilient endurance of these flowers, which are conventionally symbolic of feminine fragility, links them to other prevalent images of endurance and survival in H.D.'s work, in particular to the 'old cells— / thin rare gold' of 'Cities'[62] and the 'bright glass-bead' of Venice in *Bid Me to Live*.[63] In both 'Sea Rose' and 'Sea Lily' this endurance also has the quality of opposition—it is a survival in the face of hostile forces. There is a crucial distinction between the poems of *Sea Garden* and Julia's memory of Venice in the novel, however. The fragile bead necklace, Julia's metaphor for her memory, indicates the aesthetic and moral necessity for *continuity* with the past, whereas the very singleness and immediacy of the sea rose and sea lily work to keep history at bay, in a fashion reminiscent of Bloomian 'askesis' or purification by isolation. This highlights the important differences between 'early H.D.' and the freer self of her later, 'post-Freudian' work. It also highlights the difference between literary convention and 'actual' history, here represented by the war from which women were excluded.

This need for continuity through the destructive flux of the war is something Julia Ashton feels profoundly. In the absence of her husband, she has an intense relationship with Rico, the D.H. Lawrence character, who in reality bids her to live, telling her, in a satirical reference to Dante Gabriel Rossetti: '"Kick over your tiresome house of life."'[64] Julia's attitude to Rico is ambivalent. He inspires admiration and love, yet when an affair between them becomes a possibility, he 'shivered, he seemed to move back, move away, like a hurt animal, there was something untamed, even the slight touch of her hand on his sleeve seemed to have annoyed him.'[65] Julia speculates that his gesture is 'some sort of *noli me tangere* (his expression).'[66] Yet despite her admiration for his astonishing creative powers

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[61] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 14
[62] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 41
[63] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 24
[64] The reference is to Rossetti's *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence* (London: Ellis & Elvy, 1900)
[65] H.D., *Bid Me to Live*, p. 81
[66] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 82 H.D. makes an explicit reference to D.H. Lawrence's 'The Man Who Died' here. In Lawrence's revision of the Christian story, his protagonist, having been taken down too soon from the crucifix, recovers and addresses one of his followers thus: 'Don't touch me

and the sensitivity towards women which enables him to be a great novelist (a characteristic signally lacking in her husband), some profound differences emerge between them. By his injunction 'kick over your tiresome house of life' Julia understands that Rico senses her imprisonment and wishes her to seek experience; when she acts on this by accepting Cyril Vane's (Cecil Gray's) invitation to his house in Cornwall, Rico implies that she is making a mistake. Julia is shocked: 'What was all this? It was Rico who had stamped about, uttered his shrill peacock-cry, his death-cry, his man-is-man, woman-is-woman. Didn't he mean any of it? "It would make a difference," he said, "don't you realise?"'[67] H.D. here highlights the essential dilemma of the woman artist, (a problem Sylvia Plath would examine a decade later in *The Bell Jar*):

> Why this vaunted business of experience, of sex-emotion and understanding that they made so much of ? It might be all right for men, but for women, any woman, there was a biological catch and taken at any angle, danger. You drifted into the affable hausfrau, danger. You let rip and had operations in Paris (poor Bella), danger.
>
> There was one loophole, one might be an artist. Then the danger met the danger, the woman was man-woman, the man was woman-man. But Frederico, for all his acceptance of her verses, had shouted his man-is-man, his woman-is-woman at her; his shrill peacock-cry sounded a love-cry, death-cry for their generation.[68]

For Julia, to become an artist is to become an authentic self, to escape from the rigidly-defined sex-roles available to women in her circle: either the comfortable wife or the courtesan who has abortions in Paris. Following an artistic vocation brings the possibility of imaginative and sexual freedom, and that freedom involves the ability to imagine oneself into opposite-sex roles (a reference to H.D.'s bisexuality) where necessary.[69] H.D. here states her fundamental disagreement with Lawrence's sexual essentialism and the increasingly hysterical assertions of it which were to culminate in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.[70] Julia's final meeting with Rico in London clarifies this realisation and marks an important step towards artistic independence: 'He was willing to die for what he believed, would die probably. But

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Madeleine...Not yet! I am not yet healed and in touch with men.' D.H. Lawrence, *The Short Novels*, Vol. II (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1959), p. 12

[67] H.D., *Bid Me To Live,* p. 137

[68] H.D., Bid Me to Live, pp. 135-136

[69] It also strongly calls to mind Emily Dickinson's playful switches of gender in such poems as 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' and her self-description as 'Uncle Emily.' Gender mobility is a crucial part of Dickinson's own imaginative freedom.

[70] *Bid Me To Live* must also have been written with an awareness of Lawrence's satirical portrait of her as the fey Julia Cunningham in *Aaron's Rod;* possibly influencing her choice of a name for her

that was his problem. It was a man's problem, the man-artist. There was also the woman, not only the great mother-goddess that he worshipped, but the woman gifted as the man, with the same, with other problems. Each two people, making four people.'[71] Julia's time in Cornwall represents a form of escape from the upsets of war-preoccupied London. However, in a vital reversal, the site of her escape comes to seem more 'real' than the awful historical realities she has left behind. She finds Cornwall's separateness liberating and inspiring: 'it was not England. Rico had said that.'[72] It is an other-where, a mythical space which she identifies with Lyonesse:[73] 'So here, this walled-in space, was a world; the world, the whole world was given her in consciousness, she was see-er [*sic*], "priestess," as Rico called her, wise-woman with her witch-ball, the world.'[74]

'She was enclosed in crystal. She was perfectly at one with this land;'[75] Julia's enclosure is strongly reminiscent of the 'bell-jar' feeling experienced by H.D. in the Scilly Isles in 1919 and related in *Notes on Thought and Vision*.[76] But H.D. seems to be at pains to state that this altered, womb-like consciousness is a unique discovery: 'Somewhere, somehow, a pattern repeated itself, life advances in a spiral. She was not analysing herself in the new mode of the Bloomsbury intellectuals, with half-baked misapplied theories from Vienna. She was feeling, however, something explicit in this pattern.'[77] This 'something explicit' arises from her contact with what is continuous in Nature: 'Each separate twig formed to her

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heroine. Lawrence's portrayal of H.D. took a kinder turn in the more straightforwardly autobiographical *Kangaroo*.

[71] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 136

[72] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 145

[73] H.D.'s use of this analogy invites a comparison with Sylvia Plath's poem on the same subject, which also links Lyonesse with consciousness—in this case the (almost malicious) failure of God to maintain Lyonesse by keeping it in his divine mind. The drowned Lyonians react to their predicament with surprised vanity: 'it never occurred that they had been forgot.' For Plath, Lyonesse is comfortless, the model of a god-forsaken world instead of an idealised utopia. It is suggested that he drowning of Lyonesse is the punishment of a lazily indifferent God, a kind of deliberate amnesia resulting from post-war fatigue: '...the big God / Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip / Over the English cliff and under so much history! / They did not see him smile, / Turn, like an animal, / In his cage of ether, his cage of stars. / He'd had so many wars! / The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.' In Plath's apocalyptic vision H.D's fertile palimpsest is replaced by the white tabula rasa of atomic-age annihilation. See Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 232

[74] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 147

[75] H.D., *Bid Me to Live* p. 145 There is also perhaps an echo here of Steven's 'fat girl, terrestrial' from the final section of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction': 'Until flicked by feeling, in a gildered street, / I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo. / You will have stopped revolving / Except in crystal.' Stevens, *Collected Poems*, p. 407

[76] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision and The Wise Sappho* (New York: New Directions Press, 1982; San Francisco: City Lights Books)

imagination, another genus; twig, stalk were twig, stalk of other un-named but racially remembered flora.'[78] What is permanent and enduring in nature contrasts with the depersonalising invasiveness of the modern city. This is a realisation of the mythic within the historical, which is the major theme of H.D.'s later poetry. Julia remembers, 'London had blotted her up, she was one of so many millions. London seemed inexhaustible in its power to soak up, to absorb...[but] here was an old, old parchment, everything here spelt something.'[79] From the position occupied by Julia, it is the war which begins to look like a sham or chimera: 'Rafe Ashton, in his uniform, was dressed up, play-acting, "That's the stuff to give the troops." It was all neat, all neatly dated, war-time heroics...All the million in the background who didn't turn up. The sound of shrapnel. The noises...off.'[80] H.D. puns here on the notion of the 'theatre' of war, and the familiar soldiers' slang for an attack, a 'show.' For the first time since the war, she feels whole: 'she hugged her old coat tight, hugging herself tight, rejoicing in herself, butterfly in cocoon.'[81] This reference to a cocoon shows that Julia's newly discovered space is a realm of potential, a gestatory space for the re-birth of the self. This is a theme to which she would return in *Helen in Egypt*, but here it is worth noting Bachelard's comments on the place of the chrysalis image in his examination of the emergent poetic consciousness:

> the word chrysalis alone is an unmistakable indication that here two dreams are joined together, dreams that bespeak both the repose and the flight of being, evening's crystalization and wings that open to the light...nest, chrysalis and garment only constitute one moment of a dwelling place. The more concentrated the repose, the more hermetic the chrysalis, the more the being that emerges from it is a being from elsewhere, the greater is his expansion... great dreamers profess intimacy with the world. They learned this intimacy, however, meditating on the house.[82]

There are several important points of comparison between Julia's altered consciousness and the consciousness displayed in *Sea Garden*. For Julia, London life necessitated a dulling or numbing of her consciousness for the purposes of survival; she represses the memory of her 1915 miscarriage, attempts to ignore

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[77] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 148
[78] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 149
[79] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 158
[80] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, pp. 150-151
[81] H.D., *Bid Me To Live*, p. 151
[82] *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 65-66. I also examine H.D.'s use of the chrysalis image in the earlier novel *HERmione* in Chapter Four.

Rafe's infidelity, and tries simply to exist between his periods of leave. In Cornwall her consciousness is heightened in a way which is not the result of war-neurosis. Moreover, her consciousness of *time* appears to have been altered. The Cornwall scenes are full of a kind of relaxed, reassuring immediacy, in contrast to the uncomfortable jump cuts of the London narrative. Many of the same preoccupations occur in *Sea Garden*, but never with the sense of joyous discovery described in *Bid Me to Live*. More frequently, the speaker finds herself shut in or smothered by her immediate environment. It is an imprisoning pastoral rather than a fruitful enclosure. This can clearly be seen in 'Sheltered Garden', which begins:

> I have had enough.
> I gasp for breath.
>
> Every way ends, every road,
> every foot-path leads at last
> to the hill-crest—
> then you retrace your steps,
> or find the same slope on the other side,
> precipitate.[83]

The sameness, the monotony of her garden environment exhausts the speaker. Her enervation is expressed mimetically by the cleverly placed line-break between lines 7 and 8— the full pentameter of 'or find the same slope on the other side' somehow suggestive of the exertion of climbing, and then the anticlimactic 'precipitate' which seems to block escape. Like the speaker of 'Garden', which comes later in the sequence ('O wind, rend open the heat'), the speaker of this poem wishes for some act of violence to break the genteel stasis:

> I have had enough—
> border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
> herbs, sweet-cress.
>
> O for some sharp swish of a branch—
> there is no scent of resin
> in this place,
> no taste of bark, or coarse weeds,
> aromatic, astringent—
> only border on border of scented pinks.[84]

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[83] H.D., *Collected Poems,* p. 19
[84] H.D. *Collected Poems*, p. 19

I read this plea for astringency as an encoded reference to the scented bowers of 'ladies' poetry—the Kate Greenaway language of flowers which Joyce claimed 'The Waste Land' to have ended in 1922. What is so remarkable is that H.D. uses the familiar flower imagery (in much the same way as Dickinson) in an antithetical sense. The poem continues with what is probably a more general reference to the *lives* of women, as well as their writings:

> Have you seen fruit under cover
> that wanted light—
> pears wadded in cloth,
> protected from the frost,
> melons, almost ripe,
> smothered in straw?
>
> Why not let the pears cling
> to the empty branch?
> All your coaxing will only make
> a bitter fruit—
> let them cling, ripen of themselves,
> test their own worth,
> nipped, shrivelled by the frost,
> to fall at last but fair
> with a russet coat.[85]

It is a clear statement of the predicament of women in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The 'wadded' pears which are cushioned from the blows of life are weak not because any inherent flaw, but because they have not been allowed to 'test their own worth' against the world. The reference to the 'bitter fruit' brings to mind the stereotypically malicious nature of the thwarted woman. Moreover the poem's setting in an artificially enclosed space shows that this is not in fact a natural state of affairs, but that characteristics which have been demonstrated to be 'inherent' are the result of a tradition of cultivation. The discontent (bordering on hysteria) which ripples below the surface of this text, as well as its historically representative quality, show how far H.D. was, even in this first volume, from being the cool, detached, 'perfect Imagist.' The poem appears to be a generalised comment on the position of women at the time of the suffragette agitation, but I would also suggest that it invites a more specific reading. A comparison of 'Sheltered Garden' with another poem, which was composed at around the same time but never published, 'Envy,' uncovers another possible layer of meaning.

'Envy' is a less formally successful poem, perhaps because it refuses the controlling metaphors of 'Sheltered Garden,' relying instead on the force of its passionate rhetoric to carry it along. It is addressed to an individual who has wronged the poet, in all probability Aldington:

> I envy you your chance of death,
> how I envy you this.
> I am more covetous of him
> even than of your glance,
> I wish more from his presence
> though he torture me in a grasp
> terrible, intense.
>
> Though he clasp me in an embrace
> that its set against my will,
> and rack me with his measure,
> effortless yet full of strength,
> and slay me
> in that most horrible contest,
> still, how I envy you your chance.[86]

The poem describes an erotics of death similar to the trope used by Wilfred Owen in 'Arms and the Boy'[87] except that the ironic gentleness of that poem is here transformed into a narrative of rape: 'though he pierce me with his lust, / iron, fever and dust, / though beauty is slain / when I perish, / I envy you death.'[88] The implied sexual relationship between the speaker of the poem and the addressee has suffered a displacement into violence; H.D. revives the commonplace metaphor for orgasm until it is difficult to tell sex and death apart. The lover's embrace is figured as

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[85] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p.20
[86] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 319
[87] See *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems*, p. 41:

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges whose fine zinc teeth
Are sharp with sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

fierce and injurious, while violent death is seen as a passionate consummation: 'what is left after this? / what can death loose in me / after your embrace? / your touch, / your limbs are more terrible / to do me hurt.' The very personal lines 21-23 may carry an explicit reference to H.D.'s lost child: 'have I not cried in agony of love, / birth, hate, / in pride crushed?' whereas section III seems to be referring to Aldington's sexual infidelities and her own helpless response, an emotional numbness which masquerades as indifference: 'I whose heart, / being rent, cared nothing, / was unspeakably indifferent.'[89] It is clearly the same scenario as that described between Rafe and Julia Ashton in *Bid Me to Live*. The fact that the poem remained unpublished gives a fair indication of H.D.'s persistent anxieties about exposure through publication and the attitudes towards messy emotional verse that pertained at that time (especially in the wake of Eliot). This poem fell between the rock of sentimental late Victorian women's verse and the hard place of so-called 'confessional' poetry which emerged in the post W.W.II period among H.D.'s compatriots W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath et al. The awkwardness of its rhetoric is interestingly expressive of this predicament: it is deeply personal, yet couched in an inappropriately formal language full of incongruous rhetorical gestures ('nay, spare pity'[90]). The 'chance of death' which the speaker so envies is evidently death in combat, and when read against 'Sheltered Garden' may help to explain 'Envy's penultimate stanza:

> For this beauty,
> beauty without strength,
> chokes out life.
> I want wind to break,
> scatter these pink-stalks,
> snap off their spiced heads,
> fling them about with dead leaves—
> spread the path with twigs,
> limbs broken off,
> trail great pine branches,
> hurled from some far wood
> right across the melon-patch,
> break pear and quince—
> leave half-trees, torn, twisted
> but showing the fight was valiant.[91]

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[88] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 319
[89] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 321
[90] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 321

The plea reads like a threat or a libidinal invocation of catastrophe; the speaker invites violence in the same way as 'Envy' does, as some ultimately satisfying consummation. Is the landscape portrayed in this stanza similar to that of war-torn France or Belgium? The poem, seemingly so decorous, is in fact burdened with hatred and guilt; the hatred of limitation, sham and separation from natural forces, and the guilt felt by the protected on behalf of the imperilled. It embodies an apocalyptic vision very similar to that of Yeats, and its final strophe 'O to blot out this garden / to forget, to find a new beauty / in some terrible / wind-tortured place' is strangely prophetic of Yeats' 'Byzantium' from his 1933 collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*: 'That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.'[92] Although H.D. cannot be said to have had (at this stage anyway) a theory of historical catastrophe comparable to Yeats', the cataclysmic events she lived through did eventually necessitate a similar artistic response. Here, however, it his her felt alienation from reality which is the cause of anguish.

There is no doubt that H.D. was invoking pastoral conventions in the writing of this collection, but where Andrew Marvell discovers Nature effortlessly yielding its riches to him in 'The Garden' ('The Luscious Clusters of the Vine / Upon my mouth do crush their Wine; / The Nectaren, and curious Peach, / Into my hands themselves do reach'),[93] H.D. sees nothing but the smothering artifice of the place. A comparison with Marvell may prove instructive here. While the enclosed spaces of H.D.'s garden have much in common with Bachelard's phenomenological spaces, in this earliest volume they are largely imprisoning, inimical to the woman who is forced to inhabit them. William Empson emphasises Marvell's sense of control over the garden as a symbol of everything else: 'Nature when terrible is no theme of Marvell's, and he gets this note of triumph rather from using nature when peaceful to control the world of man.'[94] The delicious surrender imagined in the poem's fifth stanza: 'Stumbling on Melons, as I pass, / Insnar'd with Flow'rs, I fall on grass' is the luxurious result of already having an assured knowledge of power, as Empson writes: 'the first four [stanzas] are a crescendo of wit, on the themes "success or failure is not important, only the repose that follows the exercise of

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[91] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 20
[92] *Yeats' Poems*, p. 364.
[93] Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden' in *Complete Poetry,* ed. George de F. Lord (London: J. M. Dent, 1984), p. 49

one's powers" and "women, I am pleased to say, are no longer interesting to me, because nature is more beautiful."'[95] The essential point here is that surrender is figured as a luxurious form of control. The role of the creative mind in this process becomes evident in the famous sixth stanza, which is pertinent to H.D.'s 'Sheltered Garden':

> Mean while the Mind, from pleasure less,
> Withdraws into its happiness:
> The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
> Does streight its own resemblance find;
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other Worlds, and other Seas;
> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green Thought in a green Shade.[96]

This stanza describes a withdrawal which is simultaneously an assertion of mastery—the mind withdraws into 'its happiness' which is itself. The idea of the mind as mirror of all things is reinforced by the syntax, where '...the Mind, from pleasure less, / Withdraws into its happiness: / The Mind,' a totally satisfying self-identity which is taken up and echoed in the parallelism of the final line, 'a green Thought in a green Shade.' The mind is described as a kind of Platonic realm of perfected form in which all of creation finds its reflection, and which is capable of delineating uncreated, fantastical realms of its own. The antithesis in this stanza between creation and 'annihilation' reflects the greater, sustaining tension in the poem between power and the seeming relinquishment of that power: it is because the tension exists that a word like 'annihilating' does not seem incongruous in this context. William Empson writes of these lines: 'here as usual with "profound" remarks the strength of the thing is to combine unusually intellectual with unusually primitive ideas; thought about the conditions of knowledge with a magical idea that the adept controls the external world by thought.'[97] Of course the contrast with H.D.'s version of pastoral could not be greater. In 'Sheltered Garden' identity becomes a nightmare of sameness: 'then you retrace your steps, / or find the same slope on the other side, / precipitate.' The word 'precipitate' also hints at an

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[94] William Empson: 'Marvell's Garden: The Ideal Simplicity Approached by Resolving Contradictions' in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 122
[95] Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, pp. 130-131
[96] Marvell, *Complete Poetry*, p. 49
[97] Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 120

internalised danger (again recalling Hopkins' mountains of the mind). In contrast to the self-sufficiency of male sexual dominance and repletion in 'The Garden', H.D. utilises a breathless and hysterical form of address, indicative of dependence on an 'other' outside the boundaries of the poem. The implication is that the speaker is herself too enervated to break the stasis; far from possessing the occult power to control the world outside the garden, she is a prisoner inside its symbolic implications.[98] The image of intellectual plenitude used by Marvell, the 'Ocean' corresponds to H.D.'s 'Sea' which is figured as antithetical to the over-cultivated garden: H.D.'s sea is a (dangerous but desired) external element, whereas Marvell comfortably contains the ocean together with its contents. In this it is closer to the poetic space of emergence Bachelard describes. It seems to have taken H.D. longer to realise the revolutionary potential of the idea of feminine space in her poetry. As I have already observed, *Bid Me To Live* portrays Julia's isolation as power, in which London and the War are rendered artificial and her imaginative re-birth becomes real. In this way H.D. belatedly approaches Marvell's position of relaxed authority, and she is then free to project that authority into the past—revisiting the sites of her early poems and overwriting their spatial anxieties with the earned wisdom of the older artist. This is one of the many examples of her elaborate hermetic technique.

The theme of imprisonment recurs in *Sea Garden*'s most explicit poem on the subject, 'Prisoners, 'a puzzlingly context-less narrative spoken by a condemned prisoner of indeterminate gender to a beloved who is also imprisoned. The narrative purports to be a last letter written by the prisoner and delivered by means of a bribe: 'The spearsman who brings this / will ask for the gold clasp / you wear under your coat. / I gave all I had left.'[99] What is unusual about the poem is the preponderance in it of various forms of script—the prisoner seems to be imprisoned by writing:

> It is a strange life,
> patterned in fire and letters
> on the prison pavement.
> If I glance up
> it is written on the walls,
> it is cut on the floor,

[98] A parallel with the denouement of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is possible here. Of course, 'confinement' is also associated with pregnancy and childbirth, an idea which Plath's 'Poem For a Birthday' explores, as I show in Chapter Four.
[99] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 34

it is patterned across
the slope of the roof.[100]

The poem does not specify *what* is written on the walls (surely not the truism 'it is a strange life'). Rather it seems that 'life' itself, as it is to the mysterious prisoner, is *written*, like a sentence which has been passed. The poem's similarity to a number of Plath's *Ariel* lyrics is worth noting. In Chapter Four, below, I suggest that the 'black shoe' in which the speaker of 'Daddy' is imprisoned is an image of patriarchal literary history. Plath returns to the theme of imprisonment in 'The Jailer' in which the speaker dies 'with variety— / Hung, starved, burned, hooked.'[101] Plath's speaker is confined by a sadistic male oppressor who is nevertheless figured entirely dependent on his victim: 'what would he / Do, do, do without me?'[102] A parallel can also be drawn with Dickinson's poem 'They shut me up in Prose' [J.613]. Here there is a triumphant inversion:

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity -
And laugh - No more have I -[103]

The fact that all three writers have figured discourse as a form of imprisonment is highly significant. For Dickinson, H.D. and Plath, poetic space is clearly double edged, featuring as both a stifling enclosure *and* a space of possibility. H.D. works through both of these interpretations, as a comparison of *Sea Garden* with her later work makes clear. 'Prisoners' repeatedly implores its addressee to remain silent: 'Ah beloved, do not speak. / I write this in great haste— / do not speak, / you may yet be released.'[104] Speech is figured as inherently perilous—simultaneously the crime which has been committed and the gaol in which the prison term must be spent, or in the words of Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts': 'Every birth a crime, /every sentence life.'[105] The speaker longs instead for a last glimpse of the beloved's mute face: 'stand near the gate, do not speak—/ only reach if you can, your face / half-fronting the passage / toward the

[100] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 33
[101] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 227
[102] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 227
[103] Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, p. 302
[104] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 34
[105] 'Briggflatts', in Basil Bunting, *Complete Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 64.

light.'[106] Oscar Wilde's trial and subsequent gaol sentence, still fresh in the memory of Edwardian England, can surely not be far away from any interpretation of this poem. There is a clear hint of transgressive sexuality in the poem if one remembers that the 'gold clasp' worn by the recipient is likely to belong to a woman. The Hellenic eroticism in lines 52-54 ('I who have seen you at the banquet / each flower of your hyacinth-circlet / white against your hair') and lines 62-68 ('Once you lifted a spear-flower. / I remember how you stooped / to gather it—/ and it flamed, the leaf and shoot / and the threads, yellow, yellow—/ sheer till they burnt / to red-purple in the cup'[107]) supports the idea that this poem might be addressed to Frances Gregg, whom H.D. portrays as a huntress, spearwoman, and Artemis-figure in *HERmione* and *Asphodel*. If this interpretation of the poem is accepted, speech itself might well be seen as incriminating. Thus it is clear that the poem could only exist in its present form, as a highly coded, gnomic utterance apparently stripped of all personal investment, a reading which the highly wrought emotionalism of the piece necessarily qualifies. But the World War context of the poem may also be recalled here. In the hysterical atmosphere of 'loose talk costs lives' it is conceivable that some indiscretion on the part of the speaker has led to the extreme alienation of her imprisonment. In this interpretation the writing with which she is surrounded and which comprises her prison is clearly the hateful jingoism that H.D. came to despise in Aldington and others. She had seen the effect of war-time paranoia on D.H. Lawrence and his German wife Frieda (they had taken refuge in her Mecklenburgh Square apartment after being driven out of Cornwall on suspicion of being spies) and there is no doubt that the trapped, doom-laded atmosphere of the poem is evocative of the uncertainties of the international crisis they were living through. I would suggest that the poet's self-projection as a prisoner of war is a way of fantasising herself as a combatant, and thus evading the guilt expressed in poems like 'Envy' and 'Sheltered Garden.' But here, similarly imprisoned, she writes 'I am weak—weak—',[108] showing that it is not so far in sentiment from the other poems as might be supposed.

This examination of the limiting or self-limiting strategies of H.D.'s *Sea Garden* is intended to clarify several crucial points. Firstly, the opposing tension in

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[106] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p. 33
[107] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p.35
[108] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p.35

the collection between stasis and inexorable process, in both of which there is an intuited danger. Secondly, the pervasive feeling of personal weakness, of space as enforced confinement, and the consequent anxiety of the subject. Thirdly, the profound sense of isolation, even alienation, that the poems convey. I have argued that this isolation is a necessary strategy—to examine small things in detail is one way (as Marianne Moore exemplifies) of being original and of avoiding the influence-anxiety attendant upon lacking natural authority in the face of a great tradition. Fourthly, and most importantly, I have shown the importance (from the beginning) to H.D. of idea of a poetic space, visible in *Sea Garden* in the recurring motifs of enclosure and separateness (gardens, coves, inaccessible cliff temples etc). H.D.'s evocation of a mythical Greek landscape also falls under this rubric. Such tendencies are indicative of her personal and artistic isolation even at this early date. I have shown how the motif recurs as a climax to her autobiographical novel, where it is transformed into a source of strength and firmly linked to her gender—Cornwall is a positive gestatory space, a womb or chrysalis, whereas *Sea Garden*'s enclosures are claustrophobic, either sources of potential danger in themselves or else endangered by the eroticised violence of the natural processes outside. What is most striking about this as a strategy is its similarity to the impulses I have already identified in many of Emily Dickinson's poems. Both poets demonstrate what I would call a 'utopian impulse—' a technique of withdrawal in order to consolidate, to feel oneself more real, to evacuate threatening external forces from the site of one's own imagination. Where a strictly psychoanalytic reading would see underlying neurotic symptoms here, however, I wish to focus on the resulting poetic effects. To reiterate the obvious: the poems (as an intertextual reading of *Sea Garden* and *Bid Me to Live* demonstrates) are not merely a reproduction of the analysis-situation but are mediated by fiction and fantasy in a way peculiar to themselves alone. For Dickinson this imaginative realm is figured as a space of exhilaration, an experience compulsively hinted at if never fully admitted into the environment of the poem. The effect is one of imminent revelation of an almost mystical kind. The poems are dispatches from the circumference of this vast territory. In the case of H.D.'s early poetry, the threatening external forces come much closer, and the effect is less excited discovery, more forced withdrawal. In the examination of *Helen in Egypt* that follows, I will examine the transformation of these confining spaces into a comprehensive vision of emergent consciousness.

'She herself is the writing': Re-membering the Self in *Helen in Egypt*

Gaston Bachelard's ideas about the phenomenological space in literature are of startling relevance to H.D.'s mature poetic. His suspicions about psychoanalytic approaches to literary criticism are particularly illuminating in view of H.D.'s own considerable differences with Freud, as this chapter will show. Above all, it is important to reiterate that Bachelard respects the poetic image as a distinct entity, signifier of an identity which may be subject to psychoanalytical interpretation, but which is not invariably reduced to it. He writes:

> the psychoanalyst, victim of his method, inevitably intellectualises the image, losing the reverberations in his effort to untangle the skein of his interpretations. He understands the image more deeply than the psychologist. But that's just the point, he 'understands' it. For the psychoanalyst, the poetic image always has a context. When he interprets it, however, he translates it into a language that is different from the poetic logos. Never, in fact, was *'traduttore, traditore'* more applicable.[109]

My argument (following Bachelard) is that while this poetry may admit of a psychoanalytic reading, it must also remain in some crucial sense resistant to it. Because of the particularity of her connection with psychoanalysis and her declared debt to Freud, H.D.'s poetry is a pertinent example both of the hermeneutic usefulness of psychoanalysis and of its limitations as an expository tool. *Helen in Egypt* is in many ways the laboratory for H.D.'s experiment with the poetic logos, and a useful text on which to test any theory of emerging consciousness. Susan Friedman has written:

> H.D.'s dissolution of the external reality that conventionally forms the backdrop of epics helps to establish the locus of quest as the psyche and the process of search as associational reflection. In this sense, her meditative epic is phenomenological. The exploration of consciousness that distils essential reality, however, is patterned on the psychoanalysis of Freud, not the philosophy of Husserl.[110]

However this comment would tend to contradict Friedman's argument that H.D.'s disagreement with Freud was respectful but fundamental, seeming to place her

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[109] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* p. xxiv

[110] Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 67

again in a position of indebtedness. There is no need to regard H.D.'s quest in *Helen in Egypt* as either exclusively Freudian *or* classically Husserlian, as Friedman seems to be suggesting. Whereas the Freudian influence is undeniable (H.D. knew Freud, had read his work, and even portrayed him as a character in the poem), the phenomenological understanding evinced by the text could have come through any number of channels. If 'influence' demands, as I have argued, a more complex approach than the mere search for material sources, and if H.D. did not coincidentally happen upon her phenomenological approach independently, there were plenty of possible influences available to her. She was familiar with the work of her compatriot Wallace Stevens, for example, who had almost certainly read Husserl. In my view, H.D.'s portrayal of Freud as the character Theseus in *Leuké* would represent rather a placing of *him* within a limited sphere, and a moving beyond Freudianism's own purlieus; *Leuké* does not, after all, mark the end of *Helen in Egypt* but is followed by a third book, *Eidolon*, in which the quest begins all over again. Bachelard, in his poetic-phenomenological exposition of spatiality, provides a means of situating *Helen in Egypt* more readily within an examination of emergent poetic consciousness and identity. This is achieved through an understanding of the place in the text (and for Bachelard, in poetry generally) of the *transcendent* understood in a broadly phenomenological sense. He writes: 'the poetic image is an emergence from language, it is always a little above the language of signification. By living the poems we read, we have then the salutary experience of emerging...poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity.'[111] Indeed, it could be argued that this was a major facet of H.D.'s quarrel with Freud; the absence in his theory of the function of art of any place for transcendence understood as something more than sexual sublimation. As Friedman observes, 'Freud himself considered art a masculine province and culture a masculine achievement,'[112] and H.D.'s revisionism confronts this opinion directly. In doing so she does not limit herself to the terms of the Freudian model, but seeks a specifically poetic solution to a poetic and cultural dilemma.

One immediately apprehensible dilemma with regard to *Helen in Egypt* is that of its form. Horace Gregory, in his introduction to the 1961 edition of the text,

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[111] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxvii
[112] Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, p. 70

declares, 'her poem is not an epic,'[113] yet it *is* epic in scope and takes for its subject matter one of the foundational myths of Western civilisation. Surely, if a dictionary definition of epic is 'a long narrative poem recounting in elevated style the deeds of a legendary hero' then *Helen in Egypt* falls into this category? Or perhaps a more suitable term would be anti-epic, since in the overwhelming majority of accounts of the Trojan War Helen is vilified as the cause of all the bloodshed. Tracing the shift H.D. made from her earlier, widely anthologised poem 'Helen' to the capacious revision of the myth in *Helen in Egypt* provides an acute insight into the development of her poetry. 'Helen' was published in 1924 in the volume *Heliodora.* In the poem the speaker can only lament the unalloyed hatred felt by Greece for Helen, who is 'God's daughter, born of love.'[114] Helen is portrayed as voiceless and objectified, 'still', 'wan' and 'white', as completely passive, almost a corpse. Hatred and revulsion are the conditions of her continuing existence; the only possibility of love for Helen would issue through her death. Greece 'could love indeed the maid, / only if she were laid, / white ash amid funereal cypresses.'[115] Helen's passivity in the poem, her disjointed, metonymic presence (which is barely a presence at all) implies that she is a supreme victim, one whose very identity has been erased and who merely haunts the margins of a poem couched in the rhetoric of hatred. The shift from this lyric to *Helen in Egypt*, composed between 1952 and 1956 is a growth towards poetic 'inwardness'; a move from the representation of Helen as pure object—and thus an implied complicity with a culture which demands literal or symbolic sacrifice of the woman to abstract masculine ideals—to her representation as a complete subject in her own right. It is clear that a biographical parallel can be posited here also.[116] The status of the *Iliad* as an essential text of European self-representation and its continuing relevance alongside other major foundational myths for contemporaries of H.D. such as Joyce and Pound gives greater significance to her attempted handling of the epic form. Her poem's technique is of

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[113] Horace Gregory, Introduction to *Helen in Egypt*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1974), p. xi
[114] H.D.: 'Helen' in *Collected Poems* 1912-1944, p. 154
[115] H.D., *Collected Poems*, p.154
[116] H.D. was herself a much-represented woman. She appears as a character in D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod*, *Kangaroo*, and (allegedly) *The Man Who Died* (see below, p. 159); and is cruelly satirised in Aldington's novel *Death of a Hero*, John Cournos's *Miranda Masters*, and Louis Wilkinson's *The Buffoon.* The latter was probably heavily co-authored by H.D.'s erstwhile 'girl-love' Frances Gregg (Fayne Rabb in *HERmione*), who was Wilkinson's wife. H.D. is also portrayed rather unkindly in William Carlos William's autobiography and appears in Robert McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together* as the helpless victim of Bryher's emotional manipulations. Robert Mc Almon, *Being Geniuses Together* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 54

particular interest when considered against the background of Pound's *Cantos* and his wartime activities; the scale and ambitious inclusiveness of the *Cantos* contrasts pointedly with H.D.'s 'hieroglyphic' method in *Helen in Egypt*.

A later work of H.D.'s which provides some insight into her attitude to the epic is *Hermetic Definition*, the second part of which is a direct response to another of her eminent contemporaries and another writer of epic poetry, St.-John Perse. The poem seems to have been occasioned by a gesture the Guadeloupian poet made during the ceremony to mark the awarding to H.D. of the American Academy of Arts and Letters' gold medal for poetry in 1960: H.D., disabled by the hip she had broken in 1956, had stumbled on the platform after her acceptance speech, and Perse had reached out to support her.[117] For H.D. it represented a gesture of acceptance by a peer, perhaps a more important honour, she implies, than the gold medal itself: 'it wasn't that I was accepted / by the State, the Office, the Assembly, / but by you.'[118] The sequence then proceeds to a consideration of both their poetries; Perse's *Anabase* and *Exil* being epic in scope and execution, in contrast to her own technique which she recognises as 'antithetical.' Like *Helen in Egypt*, the poem dramatises a way of reading which is also a mode of *being*: 'I do not compete with your vast concept, / the prick of pine needles brings me back, / yet I am a part of it / as I am part of the spiked / or smooth or lacquered sea-grass.'[119] The poem moves from initial gratitude and admiration: 'your mind's thought and range / exceeds mine / out of all proportion,' to a self-understanding which is inclusive of those feelings while recognising a separate and individual necessity: '*Seigneur*, you must forgive my deflection, / I can not step over the horizon; / I must wait to-day, to-morrow or the day after / for the answer.'[120] The word 'deflection' is of interest here. It is as though Perse's gesture represents a danger as well as a benefit, but a danger only the woman poet can intuit, that of being subsumed by the vaster conception of Perse's poetry, in effect seduced into forgoing her own quest. The poem literally *admits* an influence by incorporating many quotations from Perse's work in its structure, but it ultimately returns to what H.D. calls 'ordinary time-

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[117] See Norman Holmes Pearson, foreword to *Hermetic Definition*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1972)
[118] H.D., *Hermetic Definition*, p. 24
[119] H.D., *Hermetic Definition*, p. 32
[120] H.D., *Hermetic Definition*, p. 44 The 'I can not step' here also puns on H.D.'s lack of mobility, the cause of Perse's initial gesture towards her.

sequence' and 'old habit.'[121] It demonstrates the effect upon the poet of a strong influence, dramatising the dynamics of this process in a highly self-aware and explicit fashion.

Helen in Egypt is in many ways the culmination of H.D.'s lifelong preoccupation with Hellenic themes. Perhaps the catastrophic events of the first half of the twentieth century contributed to the *Iliad*'s continuing relevance and representative force for H.D. and her contemporaries; certainly H.D.'s interpretation is coloured by a new attitude to the text's militaristic and androcentric world-view, as well as coming in the wake of Benjamin's now famous statement in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'[122] The prose passage of the first section of the book informs us of her immediate sources for the version of the story she has chosen to re-tell: '*We all know the story of Helen of Troy but few of us have followed her to Egypt. How did she get there? Stesichorus of Sicily in his* Pallinode, *was the first to tell us. Some centuries later, Euripides repeats the story.*'[123] H.D. comments on the tradition that claims Stesichorus was 'struck blind[124]' because of his earlier vilification of Helen, but miraculously restored to sight after his kinder treatment of her in his *Pallinode.* She also cites Euripides' play *Helen* as evidence of the Greek playwright's (symbolic) restoration to sight after *his* unflattering depiction of Helen in his earlier plays. Euripides' is the most comprehensive extant version of the alternative myth that survives from antiquity and it is even thought that he may have composed it with a female audience in mind. It has been suggested that the play was intended for private performance on the occasion of the *Thesmophoria* festival, dedicated to Demeter and Persephone, in which the religious rites were attended exclusively by women.[125] The parallels with H.D.'s poem are numerous. H.D., for example, follows Euripides in placing Helen under Proteus' protection at the beginning of her poem. The evident anti-war sentiments expressed by Euripides in his play also appear to coincide with H.D.'s own. Vellacott reminds us that *Helen*

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[121] H.D., *Hermetic Definition*, p. 44
[122] Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999) p. 248
[123] H.D.: *Helen in Egypt*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1974), p.1
[124] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, p. 1
[125] See Philip Vellacott's introduction to Euripides' *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, Penguin, 1973, p. 24

> was first publicly acted in 412 BC, less than a year after news reached Athens of the catastrophic defeat of the Sicilian expedition; and, woven into the fabric of the comedy, are some of Euripides' most forthright criticisms of the war... the poet's condemnation of the futile war which Athens repeatedly refused to end is most powerfully conveyed by his use of the contrived tale, invented by Stesichorus a few generations earlier, that Paris went off to Troy with a phantom Helen, while Helen herself spent seventeen years in Egypt. By accepting this tale as true, he shows the greatest war in ancient history as a disastrous error from beginning to end, all its crimes and agonies a purposeless performance, its heroes puppets, its achievement nothing.[126]

Euripides' statement about the futility of war involves an exoneration of Helen, who is shown to be a patient, resourceful, and loyal wife to Menelaus, rather than the Greek harlot of tradition. *Helen in Egypt* was composed in the aftermath of the most destructive war in human history, and it seems probable that H.D. would have considered Euripides' statements on the subject in his play as highly relevant to her own time.[127] In addition, Euripides' Helen evinces a self-consciousness about her public persona and the significance of her name which is strongly reminiscent of H.D.'s interpretations. At one point in the play, Helen imagines herself as a sort of palimpsest, declaring: 'my very beauty led to my taking on an untrue and hideous appearance in the eyes of the world. O, if the picture could have been wiped out and painted over again, to give me my true beauty, so that the Greeks could forget the blemishes I now possess, and remember the good instead of the bad!'[128] From this extract alone it is possible to surmise that H.D. found Euripides' play to be a highly enabling influence in her own revisionary composition, concerned as it is with the mobility and adaptability of Helen's identity, as well as with the intellectual resourcefulness she displays in the reconstruction of that identity. Another significant parallel is that Demeter, the 'Great Mother' is honoured in both works; indeed in *Helen in Egypt* the mother goddess (in her various manifestations) provides the bass note to the entire mythology.[129] Eileen Gregory has commented extensively on the centrality of Euripides among H.D.'s Greek influences, noting

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[126] Vellacott, introduction to Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, p. 27-28

[127] The strongest statement of anti-war sentiment is placed by Euripides in the mouths of the chorus: 'You who in earnest ignorance / Would check the deeds of lawless men, / And in the clash of spear on spear / Gain honour - you are all stark mad! / If men, to settle each dispute, / Must needs compete in bloodshed, when / Shall violence vanish, hate be soothed, / Or men and cities live in peace?' Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, p. 171

[128] Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, p. 143

[129] The possible biographical significance of this becomes apparent when one considers that H.D.'s mother's name was Helen Wolle Doolittle.

that it was after her work on the translation of choruses from *Iphigenia* that H.D. began to 'explore the possibilities of a choral poetry.'[130] Gregory suggests that the very qualities for which Nietzsche condemned Euripides in *The Birth of Tragedy* may have proved attractive to H.D.: 'He [i.e. Euripides] consistently disintegrates the intellectual and moral *nomos* of the heroic world and simultaneously reveals the intensity of isolated lyric moments and the loneliness of partial heroisms enacted within fragmented contexts.'[131] It was in Euripides' revision of the Helen of Troy story as well as in the Stesichorian fragment that H.D. discovered a method and an ancient sanction for situating her work at an oblique angle to a tradition which included the many attempts of her male contemporaries to re-examine the Homeric myth.[132] As Friedman has recognised,

> H.D.'s Pallinode is a far more fundamental critique of tradition than Euripides' and Stesichorus' revisions of the Helen myth. They both established Helen's innocence by seeing her as a virtuous and chaste wife who waits patiently in Egypt for her husband to reclaim her. H.D., on the other hand, bases her defense of Helen on a redefinition of innocence that squarely confronts the patriarchal mythos by which women were either chaste wife or illicit lover. H.D.'s "Pallinode" is a "song against" the male-dominated system of values that victimized Helen as *both* wife and lover.[133]

This is achieved largely by H.D.'s rooting of her re-vision of the apocryphal version of the myth firmly in the psyche or emerging consciousness of Helen herself. The poem represents a hermeneutic quest, the object as well as the subject of which is Helen. We are told in *Pallinode* 2.3 that 'she herself is the writing'[134], and the book's labyrinthine structure underlines this notion, being divided into

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[130] Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, p. 148

[131] Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, p. 23

[132] Yeats' lyric *No Second Troy* is a case in point. In his poem an ostensible exoneration of the woman for filling his days with misery and teaching 'to ignorant men most violent ways' has the effect of denying her the exercise of will, the actual exercise of which (in her refusal to become a luxury for the poet) is the precise cause of his misery: 'Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?' In implying that Maud Gonne's mind is 'simple' Yeats refuses to grant her any political awareness or express in any but the most euphemistic manner his disapproval of her self-dramatising political stunts. The lyric is a perfect example of the method by which the traditional *femme fatale* image is used to elevate a woman in order ultimately to give vent to the poet's disapproval of her and his frustration at his inability to master her. Yeats, 'No Second Troy' in *W.B. Yeats: The Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 101

[133] Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, p. 256. I would disagree slightly with Friedman's interpretation of Euripides' text here; in the play it is through Helen's sharp wits and initiative that she and Menelaus escape the Egyptian king Theoclymenus, who has vowed to kill any Greek who sets foot inside Egypt and to take Helen for his wife. Helen is certainly depicted as chaste, but she is far from being entirely passive, except insofar as she—like all of the male characters— is a pawn of the gods.

[134] H.D., *Helen in Egypt,* p.22

sequences of strophes, each preceded by a short prose section providing a prefatory gloss on the lyric that follows. There are many possible interpretations of H.D.'s intentions in structuring the text thus. Certainly, the prose sections can be seen as 'objective' commentary on the 'subjective' or 'ontological' lyrics; however if one accepts this interpretation it is important to bear in mind the belated quality of the prose—despite the primary position the sections occupy they speak of the poetic text as *already read*, frequently quoting from it. In this way they act as a guide to interpretation, although as other commentators have noted, they are unconventional prefaces in their frequent admission of puzzlement, culminating in the two-line passage which precedes the final strophe: 'One greater than Helen must answer, though perhaps we do not wholly understand the significance of the Message.'[135] It is possible to regard the poem's structure as a reproduction of the analysis-situation, in which the prose becomes the self-representation of the pure 'experience' of the poems. On a simpler level, *Helen in Egypt* reads like a rediscovered textual fragment from antiquity which has been furnished with a tentative annotation, rather like the annotations of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. The text accommodates all of these interpretations and more, but it is especially important to stress the *dialectical* nature of the structure. The dialogue which the text carries on with itself is continuously split between being and reflexivity; its resolutions are provisional and inconclusive, always subsumed or undercut by a 'third term' which in turn becomes the first digit of the next equation. This is reflected most obviously in the poem's triadic structure (echoing that of *Trilogy* and other, later works), but it is also an accurate reflection of the movement of desire itself: 'there was always another and another and another'[136] as Theseus (Freud) tells Helen in *Leuké* 5:3. For Theseus this sequence represents the 'knots in the thread'[137] given him by Ariadne, in order that he should find his way safely out of the labyrinth. Freud's/Theseus' labyrinth is that of the human psyche, Helen's labyrinth is that of her own self and the text—and for the reader these entities are equivalent. Given this, the poem's prose sections become like signposts the reader must use to find her way through the maze of the poem. However, H.D. provides a warning about the 'risk' involved in any quest of this sort: 'you may ask forever, you may penetrate / every shrine, an initiate, / and

[135] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*: *Eidolon* 6:8, p. 303
[136] H.D., *Helen in Egypt: Leuké* 5:3, p.167
[137] H.D., *Helen in Egypt: Leuké* 5:3, p.167

remain unenlightened at last.'[138] It is hardly an encouragement to the reader, but does hint at the function of opacity within the narrative, a conscious function—manifested especially in the text's preoccupation with veils—startlingly reminiscent of Dickinson's advice to 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.'[139] This is also linked to the book's concern with gender. It is implied that the desire to 'penetrate' is a desire of the intellectual faculty, which is characteristic of—although not exclusively so—a masculine outlook and approach. In contrast, Helen's knowledge of the hieroglyphs surrounding her in Egypt is 'intuitive or emotional...rather than intellectual.'[140] Her grasp is synthesising and inclusive rather than cold and discriminating. There is an echo of this on the level of the poem's narrative, which explodes the illusion of compositional linearity. Instead it ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes, reproducing mimetically the movement of consciousness itself as it encounters and overcomes obstacles to understanding, and the dynamics of female sexual desire. But it is by examining the text's literalisation or reification of the notion of structure by means of images that a way into the Gordian complexities of the narrative can be found. The discussion that follows will examine in specific detail the first two of *Helen in Egypt's* three sections, *Pallinode* and *Leuké,* as being most relevant to our consideration of the function of consciousness in the poems.

Pallinode opens with a voice of reassurance in the aftermath of war, and the voice is Helen's:

> Do not despair, the hosts
> surging beneath the Walls,
> (no more than I) are ghosts;
>
> do not bewail the Fall,
> the scene is empty and I am alone,
> yet in this Amen-temple,
>
> I hear their voices,
> there is no veil between us,
> only space and leisure
>
> and long corridors of lotus-bud
> furled on the pillars,
> and the lotus-flower unfurled,

[138] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode*, 6:1, p. 78
[139] Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, p. 506
[140] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:7, p. 13

with reed of the papyrus;[141]

Helen seems to imply that her very survival, the fact of her existence, is cause enough for hope. As the prose preface informs us, she has been 'transposed or translated' into Egypt by Zeus, who is a type of Proteus, the Egyptian father-deity. The space represented by Egypt is of another order to the scene of the battle, it provides 'peace' and 'space and leisure' in which to reflect and 'reconstruct the legend.'[142] The text actively comprises this reconstruction, and its beginning in Egypt is significant because of the implied identification of Helen with Isis, the all-powerful universal goddess who was worshipped as devoutly in Rome and Greece as in North Africa.[143] According to the legend, Isis searched the world for the parts of her dismembered brother and husband, Osiris, whom she restored to life and by whom she conceived a son, Horus. To esoteric groups she was a 'mystagogue who held the secrets of life and death and resurrection.'[144] Helen's quest to re-member the legend, and with it her own identity, is therefore a model of Isis' task. But as well as the task of reconstruction, Egypt represents an utter reversal of the values of the Greek and Trojan scene. When Achilles appears, limping along the shore of the Egyptian beach, he is under the sign of Thanatos.[145] *Pallinode* 1:5 explains the meaning of this reversal:

> *The Myrmidons are Achaeans in Thessaly, and by* Achaei, *Homer designates the Greeks in general. But these legendary or Archaic Greeks of the north are reputedly fair-haired, a race destined later to migrate and give the warrior-cult to Sparta. Here, values are reversed, a mortal after death may have immortality conferred upon him. But Achilles in life, in legend, is already immortal — in life, he is invincible, the hero-god. What is left for him after death? The Achilles-heel.*[146]

If Achilles has been immortal in life, in death and in Egypt he appears to Helen as the 'new Mortal.' His mortality is a token of the reversal of the values of the

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[141] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:1, pp. 1-2
[142] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:6, p. 11
[143] See *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, tr. John Buchanan-Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p.544
[144] Chevalier and Gheerbrant, eds., *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 544
[145] His wounded foot also links him (although H.D. does not state this explicitly) to the literal meaning of 'Oedipus.' The significance of this becomes clearer in *Leuké*, where Helen seeks a remedy for her own wounded feet by revisiting the primal or oedipal scene under Theseus'/Freud's guidance.
[146] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode 1:5,* p. 9

'warrior-cult', that is, the ethos of militarism which declares that death in battle is the most honourable death, or as Wilfred Owen called it 'the old lie': *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*[147] Moreover Achilles' mortality, his limp, is the sign by which Helen initially recognises him, and with him the 'dim outline' of 'God's plan.' Helen asserts that it was not the arrow of hatred which shot Achilles in the heel, but 'Love's arrow': 'it was God's plan / to melt the icy fortress of the soul, / and free the man;'[148] therefore Achilles' death, as Helen vaguely perceives, marks not an end but a beginning of some kind.

Achilles' mortality has been conferred upon him by Eros (love), not Eris (strife). This introduces the notion of opposition and balance into the text, which becomes a pervasive theme. By Book Four of *Pallinode*, Helen has come to see that the Greek/Trojan reality has been dominated by the operation of Eris, which is identified with the exclusively male and hierarchical 'iron-ring' or 'Command' of the Greek kings. Achilles is described as 'Lord of the Myrmidons, indisputable dictator with his select body-guard.'[149] Although it is generally accepted that Achilles is in part a depiction of Air Chief Marshall Lord Hugh Dowding,[150] (who, due to a dispute over tactics, was unceremoniously relieved of his position in 1944 following the successful prosecution of the Battle of Britain), there are also unmistakable Hitlerian overtones in this description, which hints at H.D.'s intention to examine the reasons for militarism in *all* of its manifestations. *Pallinode* 1:2 states that the Greeks had 'fought, *forgetting women*, / hero to hero, sworn brother and lover, / and cursing Helen through eternity.'[151] [my emphasis] Although Helen is given as the 'admitted first-cause of "all-time, of all-history"'[152] she is evidently no more than a token, a cipher (like the other token women of the *Iliad*: Chryseis, Briseis etc.) upon which men project their fantasies of honour, military prowess and prestige. In this sense she is less the cause than the excuse for conflict. But Helen must examine the reasons behind the imbalance; why it is that a woman's identity can be effaced in this way and precisely what has led to her scapegoating by the

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[147] See Owen, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' in Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 1912
[148] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:5, p. 10
[149] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 4:2, p. 51
[150] See Guest, *Herself Defined,* p. 292
[151] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:2, p. 4
[152] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 3:8, p. 47

Greeks and Trojans.[153] This repression or forgetting of the feminine can be investigated only in Egypt, in the space of the Amen-temple, which is outside the devastating historical-time of the Battle. If, as I have suggested, Egypt represents a complete reversal of the values of Greece-Troy, then it is worth examining in some detail the possible significance of the narrative's location.

The immediate significance of 'Egypt' in the *Pallinode* lies in its metaphoric representation as the 'Amen-temple' or temple of Proteus, within which Helen is 'housed.' She is surrounded by hieroglyphic script, much like the anonymous speaker of 'Prisoners', except that here the script is not imprisoning but rather promises to yield enlightenment. It can be seen from her initial encounter with Achilles, when a 'night-bird' swooped past, that the temple will, like a kind of Rosetta stone, enable her to decipher her experience. She retreats to the space of the temple in order 'to assess her treasure, realize the transcendental in material terms.'[154] She has reassured Achilles, in his horror at the 'carrion-creature,' by saying '"there is mystery in this place, / I am instructed, I know the script, / the shape of this bird is a letter, / they call it the hieroglyph; / strive not, it is dedicate / to the goddess here, she is Isis."'[155] The script is simultaneously a *habitation* for Helen, insofar as it is 'already written' and a *process*, in that she is also continuously participating in the reading and by extension the production or writing of the script. It is in this sense that 'she herself is the writing'; her actual experience is somehow coterminous with her decoding/production of the text or hieroglyph. As *Pallinode* 1:7 states: 'Helen achieves the difficult task of translating a symbol in time, into timeless-time or hieroglyph or ancient Egyptian time.'[156] There is an obvious analogy here with Pound's definition of the Image as 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'[157], a definition which had itself been influenced by a consideration of Chinese pictographic script. It is clear that the Egyptian hieroglyph realised by Helen bears a relationship to H.D.'s early Imagist technique, but it immediately becomes a much more profoundly resonant symbol when one remembers Helen's conscious linkage of it with the goddess Isis. The

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[153] This theme brings to mind the litany of sacrificed women remembered by Helen in *Helen in Egypt*, as well as the mysteriously absent or sacrificed girls in the family narrative of 'The Gift.' See H.D., *The Gift*, ed. Griselda Ohanessian (London: Virago Press, 1984), p. 4

[154] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:6, p.11

[155] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:7, pp. 13-14

[156] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 1:7, p. 13

[157] Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 185

vulture was a bird of augury in the Graeco-Roman tradition; Achilles interprets it as a carrion bird from the battlefield and a symbol of doom, but Helen's interpretation is informed by her Egyptian experience. In Egyptian art the vulture was used to symbolise the power of the female deities and of Isis in particular, reproducing her function: 'devouring corpses and restoring life, it symbolised the cycle of death and life in a ceaseless series of transmutations.'[158] The vulture-hieroglyph is therefore another instance of the text's translation of a Graeco-Trojan death symbol into an Egyptian symbol of resurrection. In this way it is a microcosmic image of what the poem seeks to achieve; the resurrection of 'Helen' in her various incarnations as *other* than 'Helen hated of all Greece.' It is also unmistakably a symbol of *women's writing*, the connection with the agency of Isis makes this clear. Helen

> *says she is "instructed," she is enchanted, rather. For from the depth of her racial inheritance, she invokes (as the perceptive visitor to Egypt must always do) the symbol or the "letter" that represents or recalls the perceptive mother-goddess. This is no death-symbol but a life-symbol, it is Isis or her Greek counterpart, Thetis, the mother of Achilles.*[159]

Egypt or the 'Amen-temple' with its intricate script would therefore seem to represent an ideal timelessness of the image/word, before the fall into linear narrative with its adamantine chains of cause-and-effect, its hierarchies and discriminations. This is part of Helen's 'racial inheritance', and one can observe from H.D.'s conflation of Isis-Thetis that it has a Graeco-Trojan implication, the immense significance of which becomes ever more apparent as the poem unravels. From this it can be surmised that the text's reconstructive ambitions are broadly cultural in scope, but for purposes of this essay it is important to bear in mind the implications of such an interpretation for our examination of *consciousness* in H.D.'s work. Bachelard's study of the significance of space for the poetic consciousness is of considerable importance here. He writes of the image of the house as 'rich in unalterable oneirism'[160] adding, 'great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an

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[158] Gheerbrant and Chevalier, eds., *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 1074
[159] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*,*Pallinode* 1:7, p. 13
[160] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 13

unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special colour.'[161] *Helen in Egypt* bears out this idea of the house or hut as a 'great image,' combining the personal with all that is most generally significant for the human psyche. In the poem, Helen is attempting to recover and reassemble the shards not only of her own personal identity, but also that of her damaged civilisation, and her quest involves reaching an understanding of the ways in which these concepts are interlinked. The Amen-temple is only one of a long list of similar images in H.D.'s work, all of which are laden with symbolic import. I have already written of the enclosed spaces which appear in *Sea Garden*, and the 'gestatory space' of Cornwall in *Bid Me To Live*; to these can be added the forest hut of *Paint it Today*, the vanishing Egyptian 'birth-house' from the final section of *Palimpsest*, the childhood interiors and the London house besieged by German bombs in *The Gift* and, most significant of all for a consideration of *Helen in Egypt*, Freud's antiquity-crammed room in Vienna, recalled in vivid detail by H.D. in *Tribute to Freud*. I would also suggest that the Amen-temple is intended as a comment on D.H. Lawrence's temple of Isis in *The Man Who Died*, in which (it has been suggested) H.D. is depicted as the priestess.[162] H.D.'s temple has attributes of both the temple and the tomb in which Lawrence's 'new mortal', the Christ-figure in his story, awakens to a new life of the body. Thus the Amen-temple can be seen as a site for the intersection of many influences. In ways it can be viewed as a culminating image in H.D.'s poetic, a signifier of profound continuity and reintegration. As Bachelard observes, ' the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being.'[163]

That the Amen-temple functions as a space of habitation is, I would contend, its most significant aspect. Its very materiality, and by extension the materiality of the hieroglyphic script of which it is composed, gesture towards its relationship to *being*. A consideration of *Pallinode* 5:1 shows that this conception of being goes beyond psychologistic interpretations into a more clearly phenomenological realm. In this section, a distinction is drawn between the 'lesser personal mystery' of Helen

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[161] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 33

[162] See H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, p. 134. H.D. writes: '"I hope never to see you again," he wrote in that last letter. Then after the death of Lawrence, Stephen Guest brought me the book and said, "Lawrence wrote this for you." Lawrence was imprisoned in his tomb; like the print hanging in the waiting room, he was "Buried Alive." We are all buried alive.'

and Achilles' meeting, and the 'Greater mystery' that transcends individual circumstance and considers *why* they met rather than simply the fact of their meeting. Helen's response to this intuition is to wait for the meanings to disclose themselves:

> No, I will not challenge
> the ancient Mystery,
> the Oracle; I will walk
>
> with measured step
> the length of the Porch,
> I will turn and walk back;
>
> I will count the tread of my feet,
> as a dancer counts,
> faster or slower,
>
> but never changing the beat,
> the rhythm...[164]

The tread of Helen's 'feet' is an image of the poetic feet of the text. In her determination not to challenge the oracle she provides a contrast to traditional male questers like Jason, Odysseus, Aeneas or Theseus, who gain their ends through force or guile; Helen's retreat to the interior or domestic space of the temple implies a different, but equally valid orientation. The hieroglyphic images are psychic archetypes, certainly, but they simultaneously exist in the material reality of temple architecture. They are basic psychological-psychoanalytical imagoes in the way that they precede Helen's discovery of them (showing how her identity is already constituted and non-intentional) but they are in addition concerned with the future, with some ultimate sublimation or healing which will transcend the individual and attempt to uncover the repressed feminine principle at the heart of a war-torn civilisation. It is the kind of 'absolute sublimation' of which Bachelard speaks in his examination of the significance of the images of inhabited space:

> poetry gives abundant proof of this absolute sublimation...when psychologists and psychoanalysts are furnished this proof, they cease to see anything in the poetic image but a simple game, a short-lived, totally vain game. Images, in particular, have no significance for them—neither from the standpoint of the passions, nor from that of psychology or psychoanalysis.

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[163] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp.6-7
[164] H.D., *Helen in Egypt:Pallinode* 5:1, p. 64

> It does not occur to them that the significance of such images is precisely a poetic significance. But poetry is there with its countless surging images, images through which the creative imagination comes to live in its own domain.[165]

The images Helen encounters are not simply signifiers of underlying, personal or neurotic symptoms, but will by their transcendence provide a solution to the sickness of a society at large, a society which has been adversely affected by the dominance of Eris at the expense of Eros. H.D. goes beyond psychoanalysis to a more exclusively *poetic* understanding of the quest for healing. If poetry has contributed to the imbalance—that is, a poetry in which martial values have been elevated at the expense of the scapegoated woman—then poetry, it is implied, should contribute to the solution. Therefore it is the task of the poem to provide a model of the kind of poetry which might be necessary; a poetry which is fully inclusive of female consciousness, or simply a more fully conscious poetry. In this task Theseus/Freud is seen as a helper but not as an ultimate authority.
Claire Buck has written that *Helen in Egypt*

> neither offers a single legend told from a single point of view, nor one story from multiple viewpoints. Instead, Helen's legend turns out to involve multiple and contradictory stories which produce equally heterogeneous identities. There is no one Helen. As a result the poem becomes Helen's endless quest for both the true story and the true identity from the many.[166]

However, there is always an essential core of the self that escapes representation and reduction. Helen's quest is specifically poetic, in that it involves an attempt to find the adequate symbol with which to represent the self. But the quest is ongoing, involving both recapitulation and re-orientation, and the movement of the narrative reflects this. By the end of *Pallinode* Helen has come to some understanding of her self and has also recovered the stories of her sister, Clytaemnestra and the other 'sacrificed' women of the story: Iphegenia, Electra, Hermione. In *Pallinode* 6:4 she declares: 'I tell and re-tell the story / to find the answer.' This narrative 'return' is another instance of the avoidance of linearity and the dismemberment associated with Helen and Clytaemnestra's 'Lords': 'were they

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[165] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxix
[166] Claire Buck: *H.D. and Freud: Bisexuality and a Feminine Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p. 146

each separately / encased in the iron-armour,/ was each Typhon, a Whirlwind of War? / what did we know of any / of our Lord's activities? / we lived alone and apart.'[167] It is as if the apartness of the Amen-temple suddenly recalls the limiting separateness of the gynaeceum. Helen realises that her re-membering involves 'the whole of the tragic scene'[168] and asks herself, 'have I imprisoned myself / in my contemplation?.../ can we take our treasure, / the wisdom of Amen and Thoth, / back to the islands, / that enchantment may find a place / where desolation ruled...?'[169] In the final book of *Pallinode*, an 'eidolon' or image of Thetis appears to announce the deification of Helen along with her brothers, the Dioscuri. Her apotheosis is characterised as a kind of reward for the effort of consciousness and recovery *Pallinode* has dramatised: 'Helena has withstood / the rancour of time and of hate.'[170] The victory Helen has achieved is compared to the victory of the Phoenix over the Sphinx: '*Phoenix, the symbol of resurrection has vanquished indecision and doubt, the eternal* why *of the Sphinx.*'[171] This is figured as the victory of 'a woman's wiles,' that is, a female consciousness which has successfully unravelled the toils of the old legend, the hieroglyph which is the key to Helen's Egyptian identity and the reason for her sojourn there:

> A woman's wiles are a net;
> they would take the stars
> or a grasshopper in its mesh;
>
> they would sweep the sea
> for a bubble's iridescence
> or a flying-fish;
>
> they would plunge beneath the surface,
> without fear of the treacherous deep
> or a monstrous octopus;
>
> what unexpected treasure,
> what talisman or magic ring
> may the net find?
>
> frailer than spider spins,
> or a worm for its bier,

[167] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, p. 84 Plutarch compared the Greek monster Typhon, born of Hera's jealous rage, to the Egyptian Set, the brother of Osiris who was responsible for his dismemberment. Set was the god of desert winds, which explains Typhon's description here as 'Whirlwind of War'.
[168] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 6:8, p. 91
[169] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 6:7, pp. 89-90
[170] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 7:2, p. 96
[171] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 7:1, p. 93

deep as a lion or a fox

or a panther's lair,
leaf upon leaf, hair upon hair
as a bird's nest,

Phoenix
has vanquished
that ancient enemy, Sphinx.[172]

This is a song that celebrates a woman's consciousness, and all that it is capable of encompassing. The traditionally negative connotation of 'wiles' has here been transformed into a power to perceive, build and transcend. The centrality of Bachelard's habitation motif and its link to the creative consciousness is clear throughout this lyric, with its emphasis on the mind's capacity to imagine its own spaces, like the panther its lair, or the bird its nest. The inexorable Sphinx, which in Greece (unlike Egypt) was a monster 'half woman, half lioness, which asked riddles of those who passed it, and ate them if they failed to give the right answer,'[173] has been replaced by the life-affirming Phoenix, linked in Egyptian myth with the resurrected Osiris. So Helen objectified, inscrutable, and the cause of so many deaths has been reborn through her own act of self-remembering. The autonomy of the action of the Phoenix in its self-immolation and self-resurrection is of significance here, demonstrating that it is through the action of her *own consciousness* alone that Helen will be saved.

Pallinode ends with an exhortation for Helen to 'come home' to decipher 'other hieroglyphs' which are Greek, not Egyptian in nature, and are therefore linked with the Greek parts of her identity. Her task is not yet finished, but must continue in *Leuké*, the poem's second section. *Leuké* is of particular interest because it also uses the idea of location, enclosure or habitation, thematically linking it with the healing and re-emergence of Helen's consciousness. Consequently, my analysis of this section of the poem will again focus on images of structure and depth. Buck's assertion that there is 'no one Helen' is borne out by the narrative's abrupt relocation to *Leuké* or *'L'isle blanche'*; it is as if 'Helen in Egypt' is only the first layer of the palimpsest, while the rest of the story remains to be pieced together. The book's first prose section explains:

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[172] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 7:1, pp. 93-94
[173] Gheerbrant and Chevalier, eds., *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 903

> *Why Leuké? Because here, Achilles is said to have married Helen who bore him a son, Euphorion. Helen in Egypt did not taste of Lethe, forgetfulness, on the other hand; she was in an ecstatic or semi-trance state. Though she says, "I am awake, no trance," yet she confesses, "I move as one in dream." Now, it is as if momentarily, at any rate, the dream is over. Remembrance is taking its place. She immediately reminds us of her "first rebellion" and the so far suppressed memory and unspoken name— Paris.*[174]

The poem's insistent motif of repeated awakenings, first established in *Pallinode*, continues here. While in Egypt, Helen repeatedly and explicitly rejected the option of forgetting, or partaking of Lethe, one of the rivers of the Greek underworld whose waters brought oblivion. That part of her identity which has returned to the Greek scene of her early life now undergoes another waking, a coming-to-consciousness which also involves realising the depth of 'remembrance.' While the narrative hints that Achilles is still ultimately involved in her unfolding story, *Leuké* marks a return to the past and her first loves, Paris and Theseus. On Leuké, Helen finds herself '*back with the old dilemma — who caused the war*?'[175] Paris, whose judgement led to the initial strife among the jealous goddesses, appears in this narrative delirious from a wound he sustained in the Battle and remembering Helen as he last saw her in Troy. Paris is in part a depiction of Richard Aldington and it seems clear that the first three books of *Leuké* represent a return to the landscape of *Sea Garden.* Here the consciousness of the toll that war was to exact from the early lovers is very apparent. However the concern with continuity which I have already observed in both *Sea Garden* and *Bid Me to Live* is also strongly present here. *Leuké* reproduces the pastoral scene of *Sea Garden*'s lyrics, as Helen recognises:

> A sharp sword divides me from the past,
> yet no glaive, this;
> how did I cross?
>
> coast from coast, they are separate;
> I can recall the skiff,
> the stars' countless host,
>
> but I would only remember

[174] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké*, 1:1, p. 109
[175] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké*, 1:2, p. 111

how I woke to familiar fragrance,
late roses, bruised apples;

reality opened before me,
I had come back;
I retraced the thorny path

but the thorns of rancour and hatred
were gone —[176]

Sea Garden's pervasive imagery of shells reappears in *Leuké* 2:3, as Thetis has said: 'a simple spiral-shell may tell / a tale more ancient / than these mysteries'[177] and it is by means of this image's pervasiveness that the purpose of Helen's task upon Leuké will be illuminated. Paris, for example, remembers seeing Helen for the last time standing at the top of a stair during the sack of Troy by the Greeks: '"it's only a winding stair, / a spiral, like a snail-shell."'[178] It is in part the winding stair of memory, the portal of recall or death through which Helen and Paris have passed to find themselves reunited on the island. But there is still conflict between the lovers; Paris wishes to deny the validity of Helen's quest, and this would seem to involve a desire to confine her to small space, almost a domestic interior:

why, why would you deny
the peace, the sanctity
of this small room,

the lantern there by the door?
why must you recall
the white fire of unnumbered stars,

rather than that single taper
burning in an onyx jar...?[179]

Helen, however turns on Paris with the accusation that it is he who cannot let go of the past: 'there is despair and envy in him...."he is defeated even upon Leuké"'[180] it is not through Paris' faulty judgement or his biased (again, unbalanced) memory that Helen will achieve enlightenment. This is apparent from the fact that her encounter with Paris on the white island takes places in darkness, as

[176] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 1:6, p. 116
[177] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Pallinode* 7:8, p. 107
[178] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 2:6, p. 128
[179] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 3:6, p. 142
[180] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 3:7, p. 143

the text affirms: '*now it is dark upon Leuké*'[181] Paris' attempt to make Helen forget her earlier experience shows that he is an obstacle to her task of self-recovery, and at the end of Book Three she leaves him for Theseus, who, it transpires, represents an even earlier palimpsest-level of myth. The prose heading explains this by stating that the story of Theseus' relationship to Helen

> *is not so familiar to us as that of Paris and the early suitors. For Helen, we gather, was a child when Theseus, the legendary king and hero, stole her from Sparta. He had left Helen with his mother when he went to help his friend, Pirithoüs, steal Persephone from Hades...During the absence of Theseus on this "mad adventure," the Dioscuri, Helen's brothers, rescue her and take her home again.*[182]

Theseus's room, in which Helen arrives 'baffled and buffeted and very tired' is clearly a 'translation' (to use the terminology of the poem) of Freud's study in Vienna, which H.D. in *Advent* called a 'mysterious lion's den or Aladdin's cave of treasures.'[183] Theseus provides refuge for Helen, observing that 'your feet are wounded,'[184] a reference to the writer's block of the 1930s which, along with her 'war-phobia,' was a factor in H.D.'s seeking Freud's assistance. Her portrait of Freud/Theseus in *Leuké* is respectful and admiring, but it does nevertheless touch on some of the major differences of opinion they experienced. In *Leuké*, Theseus compares Helen to Pallas Athene:

> I had almost forgotten you, Helen,
> but, in love, I was insecure,
> only the heroes remained,
>
> the Quest and the Argo;
> stand there, stand there,
> are you the Palladium,
>
> the olive-wood statue
> that directed the Quest?
> you are older, your garments cling to you,
>
> (now you have dropped your mantle),
> like the carven folds of the Pallas...[185]

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[181] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 2:8, p. 131
[182] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 4:1, p. 147
[183] H.D.,*Advent* in *Tribute to Freud,* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 132
[184] I take this to be another reference to the text's poetic feet. The fact that they are wounded hints at H.D.'s artistic crisis and writer's block of the 1930s.
[185] H.D., *Helen in Egypt,Leuké* 4:2, p. 150

This recalls the exchange recorded in *Tribute* which took place between H.D. and Freud on the subject of a small effigy of Athene which H.D. had observed in his rooms: 'it was a little bronze statue, helmeted, clothed down to the foot in carved robe with the upper incised chiton or peplum. One hand was extended as if holding a staff or rod. "She is perfect," he said, "*only she has lost her spear.*" I did not say anything.'[186] This is an image of the woman who lacks a phallus, and although H.D. does not allude to Freud's theories of the 'dark continent' of female sexuality directly, her subsequent remark about the image of Athene, 'venerated as a projection of abstract thought...born without human or even without divine mother, sprung full-armed from the head of her father, our-father, Zeus, Theus, or God...'[187] shows that she considers Athene without her spear to be the inevitable product of an abstract, intellectual and *male* theory of femininity. H.D. 'did not say anything,' but in *Leuké* 4:2 the Athene figure embodied by Helen does not seem to be lacking anything. Instead, Theseus inquires whether she, a woman, was the archaic 'olive wood statue' which directed his entire quest. It is Theseus who admits an inadequacy, 'I had almost forgotten you, Helen, / but, in love, I was insecure,' thus suggesting that the Argo or quest might, like the Trojan War, have involved a neglect or repression of the feminine. This becomes clearer as the narrative of *Leuké* unfolds. Even Theseus is described as experiencing a bias, he '*seems inclined in spite or perhaps because of the Argo and the Quest, to sympathize with the Trojan rather than the Greek cause.*'[188] But Helen would reconcile Trojan and Greek in an attempt to reach an ideal synthesis or ultimate transcendence. In doing so she will listen to the wisdom of Theseus while maintaining the independence of her own quest.

In Book Five of *Leuké*, Theseus tells Helen that in order to counter-balance her '*too intense primary experience*'[189] she must remember '*other loves, small things, "a pearl, a bead, a comb, a cup, a bowl.*"'[190] The intense experience alluded to refers to her 'ecstatic' or trance-state in Egypt, which allowed her to decipher the surrounding hieroglyphs. I see in this a direct reference to her 'writing on the wall'

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[186] H.D., 'Writing on the Wall' in *Tribute to Freud*, p. 69
[187] H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, p. 70
[188] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, *Leuké* 4:7, p. 159
[189] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 5:1, p.162
[190] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 5:2, p. 165

experience on Corfu in April 1920. This experience is described in detail in *Tribute to Freud*, where H.D. states that 'of a series of strange experiences, the Professor picked out only one as being dangerous, or hinting of danger or a dangerous tendency or symptom. I do not yet quite see why he picked on the writing-on-the-wall as the danger-signal...'[191] In fact H.D. disagreed with Freud in his interpretation of this experience as 'dangerous' (the implication is that he thought it 'borderline' or proto-psychotic). H.D. interpreted it in another way, as *Tribute* makes clear: 'for myself I consider this sort of dream or projected picture or vision as a sort of halfway state between ordinary dream and the vision of those who, for lack of a more definite term, we must call psychics or clairvoyants.'[192] H.D. also confirms that Freud interpreted the Corfu experience as 'a desire for union with my mother. I was physically in Greece, in Hellas (Helen). I had come home to the glory that was Greece.'[193] But, beyond Freud, H.D. is keen to relate the images she saw to a deeper mythic-racial level of consciousness: 'but symptom or inspiration, the writing continues to write itself or be written. It is admittedly picture-writing, though its symbols can be translated into terms of today; it is Greek in spirit, rather than Egyptian. The original or basic image, however, is common to the whole race and applicable to almost any time.'[194] She refuses to regard the vision as merely a 'symptom', and instead holds to an affirmation of its transcendent validity; for H.D. it represented a projection from a different layer of her consciousness. The insights provided by *Tribute to Freud* can be applied with some illumination to our analysis of *Leuké,* in which Theseus tells Helen that she must 'live with the Swan, your begetter, / return to the Shell, your mother...'[195] referring to the legend that Helen had been hatched from a shell after the seduction of her mother, Leda, by Zeus in the guise of a swan. It is as if this were the central or controlling image, from which all of the other images of shells in the narrative proceed. In addition, it is clear that there is a link here with Theseus' description of the labyrinth (or Freud's unravelling of the psyche). Theseus calls the Minotaur 'an idle fancy, / a dream, a Centaur, / hallucination of infancy.'[196] He would seem to dismiss the reality of the Cretan minotaur, or to fear that 'Crete would seduce Greece, / Crete inherited the

[191] H.D., 'Writing on the Wall' in *Tribute to Freud*, p. 41
[192] H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, p. 41
[193] H.D., *Tribute to Freud,* p. 44
[194] H.D., *Tribute to Freud*, p. 51
[195] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, *Leuké* 5:2, p. 165

Labyrinth from Egypt, / the ancient Nile would undermine / the fabric of Parnassus'[197] But the fact is that the image of the labyrinth seems to retain a gynaecological significance which has not been fully acknowledged by Theseus. He fears that 'Greek creative thought' will be swallowed up by the ancient forces identified with Egypt, and by extension (the poem suggests) the primal feminine.

The rest of *Leuké* is concerned with the gains made by Helen in her response to Theseus' advice in 5:5:

> my Psyche, disappear into the web,
> the shell, re-integrate,
> nor fear to recall
>
> the shock of the iron-Ram,
> the break in the Wall,
> the flaming Towers,
>
> shouting and desecration
> of the altars; you are safe here;
> remember if you wish to remember,
>
> or forget ... "never, never,"
> you breathe, half in a trance...
> "Achilles."[198]

Helen makes it clear that she will refuse to forget Achilles and the meaning of her Egyptian experience, but she learns from Theseus by retreating into the shell, in a movement strongly reminiscent of her retreat to the Amen-Temple in *Pallinode*. The function of the shell as a basic symbol in consciousness is also commented on by Bachelard, who, with reference to the highly intricate but geometrically logical structure of the object, writes: 'the created object itself is highly intelligible; and it is the *formation*, not the form, that remains mysterious.'[199] In a discussion of Paul Valery's essay 'Les Coquillages,' Bachelard emphasises the importance of the interiority of a shell's formation, the fact that it is constructed, as it were, from the inside out:

> in a second stage of his meditation, Valery becomes aware of the fact that a shell carved by a man would be obtained from the outside, through a series of enumerable acts that would bear the mark of touched-up

[196] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 5:3, p. 168
[197] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 5:4, p. 169
[198] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 5:5, pp. 170-171
[199] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 106

> beauty; whereas "the mollusc exudes its shell," it lets the building material "seep through," "distill its marvellous covering as needed." ...in this way Valery returns to the mystery of form-giving life, the mystery of slow, continuous formation.[200]

The intimacy of the image is of use in a consideration of H.D.'s shell-imagery. For Helen, a return to the shell is a return to the womb, and the connection this establishes between gestation, consciousness, and form is highly significant. In Book Six, a new voice appears in the narrative and begins to speak 'for' Helen. It is linked to song and would appear to be the bringer of a new, specifically choric or poetic knowledge. As the prose section states: 'It takes us back to Egypt but in a Greek mode...We can not altogether understand this evocation, the rhythms must speak for themselves and the alliterations, Cypris, Thetis, Nephthys, Isis, Paris.'[201] This brings to mind Julia Kristeva's description of the energies of the 'chora' underlying or introjecting the 'normal' speech of the Symbolic order. But for Helen, this return would seem to be a source of new inspiration, knowledge, and language in its own right, and not simply a disruptive pulsion 'analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm.'[202] Indeed, I would argue that it is the very image of the shell which hints at the underlying *unity* of form and consciousness that Helen is trying to reach, in contrast to the constitutionally opposed choric and thetic orders of Kristeva's theory. Kristeva herself has distinguished her essentially unrepresentable 'chora' from that which might be understood from a phenomenological point of view:

> We borrow the term chora from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional *articulation* constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate articulation from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to a geometry.[203]

However H.D.'s description of Helen's return to the shell in *Leuké* owes a great deal more to a phenomenological understanding of consciousness than to Kristeva's implicitly political 'chora.' In *Leuké*, as in *Pallinode*, she is concerned to establish a harmonic comprehension of—and not merely a provisional truce between—the forces of Eros and Eris. This is the precise significance of the shell as

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[200] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* p. 106
[201] H.D., *Helen in Egypt,Leuké* 6:1, p. 178
[202] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* tr. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 91

a space of re-integration for her psyche; it is not a return to the ecstatic disorganisation of the chora and thereby a rejection of the Symbolic, but rather the space from which her sovereign consciousness will re-emerge furnished with the symbols of its own transcendence.

Helen, addressing Theseus, asserts the validity of her own Quest, while stressing its essential difference: 'I passed the frontier, / the very threshold you crossed / when you sought out the Minotaur...' The frontier Helen passes or the breakthrough achieved by her striving consciousness on Leuké is an actual breaking-through, as of an egg-shell, as 6:8 makes clear:

> yes — it breaks, the fire,
> it shatters the white marble;
> I see it, suddenly I see it all,
>
> the Shell, the Tomb, the Crystal,
> Tyndareus, my earth-father, and Zeus
> or Zeus-Amen in heaven,
>
> and I am only a daughter...[204]

This sudden realisation is analogous, as can be seen from the language, to an act of penetration, almost as if Helen has returned to the scene of her own conception. It is figured as a kind of reversed birth; instead of being born *from* the shell again, Helen has been born back *into* it, and thus into the full realisation of her identity as a daughter. So *Leuké* ends with another advance in Helen's consciousness. Book Seven depicts her resting after her effort of concentration, inside a secure reverie which is analogous to the ecstatic state of Helen in Egypt in Book Seven of *Pallinode*, except that here:

> the Vision is not Protean,
> it is actual, unwavering,
> each station separate, each line drawn,
>
> each pillar erect,
> each porch level with the rocks,
> and rock-steps leading down to a throne
>
> or down to a pool, a mirror
> and a reflection...

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[203] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 93
[204] H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, *Leuké* 6:8, p. 191

that is the star-way,

I will not be flung out
with wild wings,
I will bring the Hyperboreans to me,

I will encompass the infinite
in time, in the crystal,
in my thought here.[205]

The image of the shell or 'crystal' is an image therefore of her own thought, with its powerful and exact emanations. However, her consciousness cannot rest satisfied with an examination of *itself*, which is what leads her to surpass the teaching of Theseus. *Leuké* 7:6 makes this clear: '*But Helen in her Mind, or "in my crystal" as she calls it, "would see further." She would relate the pictures in time to the pictures in eternity, as she "strove in the precinct, to decipher the Amen-script*"'[206] It is important to stress that this is not solipsism. Helen does not fall into the traps of intellectual vanity (narcissism) or separatism. *Leuké* 7:7 states that '*she would endure or share the "labours" of Achilles, whatever they might be.*'[207] The initial mistake or imbalance came about because of the dominance of Eris, which led men to fight 'forgetting women.' Helen's refusal to forget Achilles leads to the breaking of *Leuké*'s virginal enchantment and the recall of Helen to Egypt, where she must share in Achilles' quest.

The third section of *Helen in Egypt*, *Eidolon*, is less concerned with Helen's quest than with Achilles' (or Achilles' insofar as it is part of Helen's own). Nevertheless, as I have suggested, it does represent the important third term in H.D.'s presentation, or the 'third of the inevitable triad.'[208] It is in this section of the poem that the conflicting terms are reconciled in the mysterious image or eidolon of Thetis, a complex image that also represents Helen and maternal heritage in general. Among the ways this is signified is the transformation in this section of Amen-Proteus into 'Formalhaut' :

This is Formalhaut's temple,
not far from Athens,
Not far from Eleusis,

Yet Egypt; not far

[205] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 7:4, p. 201
[206] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 7:6, p. 204
[207] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Leuké* 7:7 p. 206
[208] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Eidolon* 1:5, p. 215

From Theseus, your god-father,
not far from Amen, your father,

but dedicated to Isis...[209]

This is, I would suggest, an image of the father which has been re-oriented or subsumed by the mother. The German name H.D. uses here is strongly suggestive of the Moravian heritage which was her *own* maternal inheritance.[210] And indeed it transpires that *Eidolon* is concerned with the 'recoveries' of both Paris and Achilles, the recovery in question being the dredging up into their own consciousnesses of the primary maternal image. This appears at the end of the section as a small wooden effigy of Thetis which Achilles had secreted as a child: 'he set her upon a plinth / like the curved prow of a ship, / and perhaps the tree is a ship / and he sails away, but he forgot her, / the charm, the eidolon, / when his own mother came, / and he forgot his own mother / when the heroes mocked / at the half-god hidden in Scyros.'[211] This poem implies that it is the repression of the feminine element in the man (represented by his first object of worship, his mother) which has led to the fatal dominance of martial values, the 'iron ring' of the masculine hierarchical system. Helen has recovered her self, and she now recovers the maternal on Achilles' behalf. Moreover in her Rhodian identity of *Helena Dendritis*, she partakes of the substance (wood) of Thetis; she is herself a part of the maternal inheritance he sought to repress. The mysterious and much puzzled-over conveyances scattered throughout the three sections of the book, the 'caravels' and 'skiffs' which have enabled Helen to pass freely from one place and time to another, are also explained by means of the image of Thetis as the carven figure on the prow of a ship. This image of the mother as a vessel is the narrative's most profound symbol of continuity, and is metaphorically linked to all of the other enclosed

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[209] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Eidolon* 1:3, p. 212

[210] 'Formalhaut' is H.D.'s (probably deliberate) misspelling of 'Fomalhaut,' which is a bright star in the constellation Piscis Austrinis, or the Southern Fish. It is found at the end of a group of stars that represent the stream of water poured from the pitcher of Aquarius. It is also one of the 'royal stars of astrology,' the others being Regulus, Antares, and Aldebran. H.D. had a great interest in the significance of the Age of Aquarius, and the imagery of stars for H.D. is always connected in her syncretic religious vision with the Christian Star of Bethlehem, and thus to her own Moravian religious heritage. She was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, into the community of Moravians which had been established by Count Zinzendorf in the mid 1700s. (I am indebted to Professor Jane Augustine of the H.D. Society for this astrological information).

[211] H.D., *Helen in Egypt, Eidolon* 6:2, p. 292

'spaces' of *Helen in Egypt* I have examined, including Egypt with its Amen-temple, and Leuké, the white island, with its shells and crystals.

My analysis of *Pallinode* and *Leuké* has involved unravelling the complex genealogy of these images in some detail, in order to demonstrate their function as signs of spatial interiority fundamentally connected with the creation (or re-creation) in poetry of a woman's consciousness. This 'inwardness' or gestatory space is undoubtedly a response to the tradition of poetic objectification of which Helen of Troy is the most potent symbol. From being the most *represented* woman in history she has become a *representative* woman. What *Helen in Egypt* represents in terms of H.D.'s poetry is a movement from the elegiac but powerless participation in that tradition of objectifying rhetoric embodied by her 1924 'Helen', to the depiction of a consciousness which is *identical* to the poetry in which it is couched: 'she herself is the writing.' The constricting and constricted objectivities of *Sea Garden* (the underlying tensions of which I have already highlighted) have here been transformed into series of mobile, dynamic and transcendent subjectivities. This is an *inward* movement, the achievement of which is specifically formal, and the paradox of which lies in the fact that it is simultaneously an act of *emergence*. Phenomenology is a more useful tool than psychoanalysis for the inspection of these emergences, since they are not merely symptoms, nor simply reflectors of psychological dilemmas. To return to Bachelard:

> The poetic image is an emergence from language, it is always a little above the language of signification. By living the poems we read, we have then the salutary experience of emerging. This, no doubt, is emerging at short range. But these acts of emergence are repeated; poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity. These linguistic impulses, which stand out from the ordinary rank of pragmatic language, are miniatures of the vital impulse.[212]

H.D.'s images are never merely personal (herein lies one of the explanations for her obsession with myth) but always reach towards some Other, whether represented by Achilles/Paris/Theseus in *Helen in Egypt*, or by her inclusion of a readerly voice in that text, or through her consistent use of the apostrophe to implicate a listener. This is not, as I have already stated, simply a reproduction of the analysis-situation. The

[212] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxvii

images which H.D. deploys are common symbols which participate in the most intimate of psychic realities as well as the most radically transcendent. It is clear that they were objects of faith for H.D., a faith which Sylvia Plath, with her poignant 'How I would like to believe in tenderness,'[213] did not possess. But the poetic emergences documented in *Ariel* share a great deal with the breakthroughs of H.D.'s later poetry, as my next chapter will show.

[213] Plath, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' in *Collected Poems*, p. 173

Chapter Four

'No Crying Need For Definition?': Depictions of Emergence in *The Bell Jar* and *Her*

In this chapter, before moving to a detailed examination of the way Sylvia Plath's poetry elaborates on the notion of consciousness, I shall be analysing *The Bell Jar* in tandem with H.D.'s 1927 *roman à clef Her*. Both novels share a central preoccupation with emergent consciousness, as well as certain dominant spatial metaphors. But my comparison of the two books is primarily intended to highlight the striking disparities between their authors' understanding of consciousness, and to suggest some of the social and historical reasons for this. As in my previous chapter, the more openly historical narrative of the novels will assist in the contextualisation of the poetry, as well as providing a window on both authors' attempts at fictionalising self-representation. In this way I hope to avoid some of the worst excesses of reconstructive psychobiography, a critical tendency I examine in some detail in the second section of this chapter, and which, as I have already shown, is also of relevance in the cases of Dickinson and H.D. In this first section, I examine the function of consciousness in both novels in two principal ways: firstly against the background of the 'social space' and sense of Americanness portrayed by both heroines, and secondly, by means of their attitudes to gender categorisation and the 'maternal space.'

Her achieves this by depicting the psychological crisis experienced by a young woman in stiflingly proper early twentieth century Pennsylvania, *The Bell Jar* by describing the breakdown and subsequent treatment of an American teenager in the nineteen-fifties. Superficially it would seem to be a case of *Little Women* meets *The Catcher in the Rye*. Yet as Helen McNeil states in her introduction to H.D.'s novel, *The Bell Jar's* 'plot and tone uncannily resemble' *Her*. *Her* was written in 1927 but remained unpublished until 1981[1]; *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963. Sylvia Plath could not have read *Her*, but the similarities between the novels are so remarkable that it is difficult to regard them as accidental. Yet, as McNeil notes, they also differ in crucial ways: '*Her* locates

[1] The novel was first published in the United States in 1981 by New Directions Press under the title *HERmione*.

growth inwardly, in self-recognition. This is not an indulgence. By making Her a writer, unmistakably her own younger self, H.D. has given her heroine the respect and the narrative way forward that—to take a more recent example—Sylvia Plath denied her autobiographical heroine...'[2] Although Esther Greenwood is also a fledgling writer, recognisably the younger self of *The Bell Jar*'s narrator, I will argue that it is by means of the significant differences in style between the two novels that the relative freedoms of Esther and Hermione become clear. This may also have something to do with H.D.'s refusal to publish the novel. Given the frankness of her portraits of Frances Gregg and Ezra Pound, as well as the overtly bisexual nature of the eponymous heroine, H.D. would seem to have eschewed publication in order to avoid the inevitable self-censorship and compromise of her materials. This became a familiar strategy of H.D.'s, especially after the poor reception of *Hymen* and *Heliodora*, and it is a habit which very obviously links her to Emily Dickinson. The style of *The Bell Jar*, with its undoubted debt to J.D. Salinger's successful *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), as well as Plath's own recognition that in the late 1950s there was 'an increasing market for mental hospital stuff'[3] suggests that publication was, as always, an important part of her aims. Given the sensitive nature of her autobiographical material, however, she still chose to adopt the defensive carapace of her *nom de plume* Victoria Lucas.

The defensiveness of *The Bell Jar* resides also in its studied avoidance of interiority, despite its first-person narration. Its heroine maintains (with a very few exceptions), a determinedly plain and almost journalistic style. This disparity between technique and subject-matter is a the main source of the novel's disturbing irony, but as I shall argue, is also indicative of the profound problems Sylvia Plath encountered in the attempt to construct a convincing poetic 'self.' The crisis of self-fashioning depicted in *The Bell Jar* is a corollary to the poetry's trajectory. The nature of Plath's denial of Esther's inwardness is therefore worthy of examination, while the

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[2] McNeil, Introduction to H.D.'s *Her* (London: Virago, 1984), p. ix

[3] *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 495. In this entry for June 13 1959 Plath writes of having 'read COSMOPOLITAN from cover to cover. Two mental health articles. I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED. And a story, a novel even....There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, recreate it.' This passage provides a useful insight into her awareness of the demands of the literary marketplace, and her eagerness to fulfil those demands.

techniques used by both writers to describe and construct a version of their younger selves reveal a great deal about influence, literary and otherwise, in their work.

Her and *The Bell Jar* owe much to the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, but their coincidences run much deeper. On the level of plot, both novels open during a long and stultifying summer and close in winter time. Each plot encompasses a period of roughly nine months, the significance of which is evident given the theme of personal rebirth which comprises a large part of both narratives. Given that they are both intensely concerned with the question not only of personal but of national identity, America's meteorological characteristics assume significance, seeming one with the other social and sexual forces with which Hermione (Her) and Esther Greenwood must contend. In *The Bell Jar* the heat of New York is conflated with political brutality and personal crisis in Esther's memory:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers—goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.
>
> I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.[4]

Later, of course, Esther is to discover for herself exactly what it is like during an episode of badly-administered ECT and will create her own 'goggle-eyed headlines' because of her suicide attempt and disappearance.[5] For Hermione Gart, who because of her recent failure at university, realises that 'this year was peculiarly blighted,' the weather is part of what makes her feel trapped in Pennsylvania:

> She sat down on a hard upright dining room chair set against the side wall. The screened dining room window showed Gart lawn this side of the stable wall, grey as covered with sea-mist. It's too hot here. Gart is set like a bowl in this wood. It's too hot here. A canoe seemed rippling between weeds. If I could go alone to Point Pleasant but Eugenia's given the cottage to Minnie for the summer…Hermione wanted to go alone, to get away from this thing…[6]

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[4] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber 1999), p.1

[5] This technique of using political events as a foil to personal experience was later used more controversially by Plath in the *Ariel* poems, most notably in 'Daddy' and 'Mary's Song.'

[6] H.D., *Her*, p. 28

The oppressive heat of the American summer is a symbol of the social oppression experienced by the characters, both of whom feel trapped inside their particular circumstances, although Esther's freedoms are ostensibly much greater than Her's[7], who has failed at 'conic sections' in her final year at Bryn Mawr.[8] Her's acute unhappiness at her failure stems partly from shame at her loss of face before Nellie Thorpe and her friends, but also (and more profoundly), from her sense of having betrayed her inheritance. Her father and brother are both brilliant scientists, at ease in the rarefied world of mathematics. Her is alienated from her adored brother Bertrand because of her recent failure and because of his marriage to a woman she despises. As *The Bell Jar* also testifies, professional success is an intrinsic part of the American story, part of what H.D. later identifies as a specifically 'Mid Western' mentality. The age of progress (under presidents Roosevelt and Taft) was an era marked by vigorous social reform and the rise of the middle-class professional. Many of the most ardent urban reformers in fact hailed from the Mid West region. Her begins to realise that the alienation she experiences may on a more fundamental level have to do with her immediate gender and cultural inheritance.

For Esther Greenwood, on the other hand, America is a land of marvellous equality and opportunity, a fact of which she is constantly reminded:

> Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.[9]

In fact, the pressure on Esther to 'count her blessings' is suspiciously like the nineteenth-century milk-and-motherhood truisms meted out to 'difficult' girls. When, later in the novel, Esther's mother gets her a job as a volunteer in the local hospital, saying that 'the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody

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[7] Although women could attend university at the time in which *Her*'s narrative is set (circa 1907), women's suffrage was not enshrined in the U.S. constitution until 1920.

[8] It is hard not to see a satirical comment on the later Vorticist movement in Her's antipathy to conic sections, especially given the caustic portrait of Ezra Pound as George Lowndes. In fact, H.D. had failed at English Literature, which may also account for her distaste for the 'Anglo-Saccharine backwash' (H.D., *Her*, p. 129) of Nellie Thorpe and the other Bryn Mawr girls.

[9] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.2

who was worse off than you'[10] the gap between her well-meaning moralism and Esther's actual state of mind only intensifies the gruesome irony of the situation. It is worth considering the pressure which their incipient sense of 'Americanness' exerts on both girls. Her significantly avoids using the name 'United States' (at least in its English form, she later calls it 'les Etats Unis' and 'Uncle Sam'[11]). The most explicit statement of her opinions on the matter occurs in chapter five:

> She could flounder toward constructive reality which none of them [her contemporaries] then had. For them, there was no vantage point of Jazz, no sounding board of Middle West and the alien American growth of their thin strip of Europe had not then been recognised, as such. They were in fact American, hadnot yet been repudiated.[12]

The indefiniteness of this paragraph is a formal echo of the identity-confusion it delineates, a feature of the novel as whole. In a narrative trajectory which is almost entirely opposite to that of *The Bell Jar*, Her Gart is just beginning to intuit the wider social significance of her own confusion, as the objectifying authorial voice which provides the novel with retrospective and wholly modern insight has earlier remarked: 'She could not know that the reason for failure of a somewhat exaggeratedly-planned "education," was possibly due to subterranean causes...Hermione Gart could not then know that her precise reflection, her entire failure to conform to expectations was perhaps some subtle form of courage.'[13] Where Esther's collapse is a failure of nerve, a temporary rupture in her otherwise perfectly conforming personality, this reassuring, built-in narrational prescience in *Her* is an example of H.D.'s hermetic technique, an aesthetic strategy she used in prose and poetry as a form of resistance to the dehumanising forces of standardisation and homogenisation she discerns in the post-1909 world. In chapter five, Her asserts that her Pennsylvanian family was a specific mixture of European mentalities: 'they were Nordic, they were New English, they were further extinguished by Germanic affiliation. They budded from a South German affiliation

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[10] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 170
[11] H.D., *Her*, p. 232
[12] H.D., *Her*, p.46 The 'repudiation' H.D. writes of might conceivably refer to the persecution experienced by German-American families during the First World War. Her own favourite brother Gilbert was later to be killed in the war in Europe. Esther Greenwood, too, with her German heritage, recalls that her mother had been stoned at school during the first war.
[13] H.D., *Her*, p.4

to be blighted with the cross-purpose of New England.'[14] They are specifically Moravian, although H.D. chooses not to make her *Unitas Fratrum* inheritance explicit in this novel.[15] They are nevertheless, she insists, American. Minnie, her distressingly unremarkable Mid Western sister-in-law, symbolises the later assimilation of this valuable culture: 'Jazz and the prelude of the Midwest had not yet managed to drive that thin Atlantic coast wedge right off into the ocean.'[16] Since modern America is a country founded upon immigration and diversity, its identity at this point (like Hermione's) is complex and inchoate: 'Hermione flaming up into some uncharted region of "America" was so far more American than the later-day Midwest, that she, so to speak, fell ridiculously over backwards to preserve her own integral uprightness. She had a way of saying "It doesn't matter what you are so long as you are yourself."'[17] In 1909 America is still a space of possibility, and in this it parallels Hermione's own consciousness.

The crucial difference here is that the sentient individual has a degree of control over her own destiny, whereas social forces possess a quality of depersonalised—and depersonalising—inevitability. This is illustrated by Her's image of America as 'Gart and the formula and Uncle Sam pressing people down in test tubes...There was nothing in America for them but rows of desks and stabilisation and exact formalisation (Uncle Sam pressing people down in test tubes), there was nothing but standardisation...'[18] It is clear that in this sense *The Bell Jar* reads almost as an uncanny fulfilment of *Her*'s prophecies. Unlike Esther, who feels powerless in the face of a vast social machine, Hermione intuits and wishes to forestall the homogenising crucible within which a common American identity will have to be forged. Her explicit recognition of the diverse European roots of her own identity becomes a valuable source of psychological resistance, a source of strength for her as yet unformed identity as a writer. She is clearly receptive to the influence exerted by her racial inheritance, in particular the maternal or female line. The significance of this would later be fully developed by H.D., as I have already

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[14] H.D., *Her*, p. 46

[15] The most complete memoir H.D. wrote on the subject of her childhood among the Moravian Brethren in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, was *The Gift,* written during the early 1940s. H.D., *The Gift*, ed. Griselda Ohanessian (London: Virago, 1984)

[16] H.D. is presumably referring to the Harlem renaissance which took place during the 1920s.

[17] H.D., *Her*, p. 47

[18] H.D., *Her*, pp. 232-233

commented, through her identifications with her mother Helen (Hellas) in *Helen in Egypt*, as well as in *The Gift* and a number of other important late works.

There are obvious similarities between Her Gart's unexamined anxiety at the enormous task of assuming responsibility for a radically new, emergent consciousness and Emily Dickinson's adumbrated zone of consciousness. For Dickinson, as I have shown, the pioneer analogy was also crucial. The 'haunted house' which was the 'undiscovered country' of consciousness was her great project. There are striking similarities between this and H.D.'s formulation of the same dilemma:

> There was no one to tell her that America reaches round and about and that ghosts live even in America.
>
> America has its Hinterland, as yet, be it precisely stated, vaguely charted. There are today not a few signposts, set by valiant pioneers in that Hinterland of imagination. In the days of Hermione, signposts were yet unpainted. Bastards like herself, alien to either continent had yet no signposts. The later generation found their way about, put all their energy into "life," had no crying need for definition. Her's energy must go groping forward in a world where there was no sign to show you "Oedipus complex," no chart to warn you "mother complex," shoals threatening. "Guilt complex" and "compensation reflex" had not then been posted, showing your way on in the morass.[19]

But it is precisely the absence of such explanatory terminology which is conducive to originality, producing the 'beautiful but bleak condition,'[20] the radical imaginative and spatially-conceived freedom of which Dickinson wrote. H.D. seems to be implying much the same thing, and the quotation-marks she uses in the passage above are also very like Dickinson's, indicating a kind of imposed and belated language set off and isolated inside the vaguer body of the text, an importation of anachronistic explanatory terminology. Ironically, it is precisely such Freudian terminology which appears as an instrument of social re-adjustment in *The Bell Jar*. Although in 1927 H.D. was beginning to explore psychoanalytic theories, she would eventually use these ideas for her own ends, never falling into a merely doctrinaire acceptance of psychoanalytic authority. In this, she contrasts with Plath, who seems

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[19] H.D., *Her*, p. 47
[20] Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, p. 577

to have accepted many of the Freudian theories of identity-formation (particularly in regard to parental authority) with far less suspicion.

In contrast to the exhilarating possibilities intuited by Her, Esther Greenwood suffers personally from the disease of conformity which inflicts post-war Eisenhowerian America. In her case, terms like "Oedipus complex" function not as useful explanatory tags, but as part of the same social apparatus which submits her to electrocution in an attempt to purge her of her 'difference.' Although America, land of the free, ostensibly represents the possibility of limitless success, the conceit by which the uniquely privileged Esther represents her life choices is a figure of impotence:

> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.[21]

Esther's is the plight of the consumer (significantly, her career choices are represented as comestibles) faced with too many mutually exclusive choices. The fruits of temptation are represented as entirely separate from the self which must choose them, and portrayed in largely stereotypical terms: the poet is, inevitably, 'famous', the professor is 'brilliant' the exotic lovers ludicrously named, and so on. On its own terms, the self which chooses is 'starving'; hollow and lacking in substance. The contrast with Hermione's realization of her own depth, beyond the polite everyday order, could not be more apparent. Where Hermione, and the other selves she considers, like Mandy and Fayne, can be said to 'contain multitudes,' Esther's glittering and affluent society seems to induce (if not merely highlight) a corresponding vacuity of self. Esther has internalised her society's ideology of

[21] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 81

'perfect success' to such an extent that when her assurance on the point begins to crack (due at least partly to the exhaustion of relentlessly keeping up her 'All-American' façade) she finds she has no actual identity to speak of. Plath demonstrates this identity-confusion by means of a symbolic confusion of names. When Esther and her worldly-wise friend Doreen spend the evening with Lenny, the man with the 'tooth-paste-ad smile' Esther gives a false name: '"My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston.'[22] This subterfuge is more sinister than it appears, however. Her friend has no difficulty participating in the illusion: 'I had to hand it to her the way she picked up my fake name...She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now.'[23] Later, she is awakened at her hotel by a drunken Doreen accompanied by a woman attendant: 'Elly, Elly, Elly,' the first voice mumbled, while the other voice went on hissing 'Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood,' as if I had a split personality or something.'[24] That a confusion about her identity is felt by Esther on a more basic level can only be inferred from this projected representation of her fissured personality. The reader is denied access to her psychological interiority. Plath instigates a curious narrative sleight-of-hand by eschewing the stream-of-consciousness technique; the reader must intuit Esther's real state of mind from her own later description of her thoughts and actions, when she has already taken pains to point out her habit of deliberate subterfuge. The tone of the writing is itself part of the front that Esther maintains; despite the harrowing nature of the subject-matter, she only sounds convincingly vulnerable once, when she is ineptly given ECT: 'I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.'[25] The intense pathos of this sentence arises out of its abruptness in the strangely jaunty, ingenuous narrative. It is as if Esther is genuinely surprised.

Indeed this is the main 'problem' with the narrative of *The Bell Jar*: are we to take Esther at face value, accepting the naïve Alice-in-Wonderland blandness with

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[22] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p.12
[23] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* pp. 13, 16
[24] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p.22
[25] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 152

which she describes her experiences, or is she to be regarded as innately unreliable?[26] This disparity indicates that paranoia is part of the very structure of the novel.[27] Stan Smith has observed that the heroine's psychological alienation is used to offer a uniquely objective, almost anthropological, examination of her society. The symptoms of her illness provide a successful 'aesthetic alienation' which he regards as a function of Plath's 'irony of artifice.'[28] Thus, he writes, 'Esther's paranoia penetrates the bland benevolent surfaces of other people's motives to discover their inner and unconscious significance,'[29] citing Esther's hostile reaction to the suspiciously good-looking Doctor Gordon as an example. What Smith does not acknowledge, however, is that Esther's interpretation of *everybody*'s motives in the novel (apart from Doctor Nolan) is relentlessly negative and cynical. It is Esther who cannot comprehend the psychological complexities of the people who surround her, which in fact leads to a *diminution* in her powers of empathy and understanding, and a tendency to reduce the Other to the level of stereotype. *The Bell Jar*'s characters are hardly the penetrating psychological portraits that Smith would claim, rather they are simulacra-individuals, part of the elaborate projective mechanism of the paranoiac.

The novel's unconvincing conclusion has also been seen as a significant aesthetic flaw. In the course of her astute study of the novel, Pat MacPherson writes:

> Plath means to give us Esther as heroine. But the deeply despised details of female life and character littering Esther's triumphant exit from the women's ward are not the stuff of feminist heroism but of disguised self-hatred...Such 'rebirth' as Esther's through shock treatment and analysis and heterosexual initiation, unaccompanied by her own re-vision of the meaning of gender relations, wipes the slate clean only to prepare it for the exact same message.[30]

Elisabeth Bronfen also recognises that at the close of the novel, 'the protective positive resolution troubles the traumatic material that has been brought to

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[26] *The Bell Jar* is similar in tone not only to Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* but also to Nabokov's *Despair*, which uses a similar doubling technique. In *Despair*, however, the narrative ambiguity unfolds gradually until the narrator's narcissistic mania is plain even through the self-justifying rhetoric of the text.

[27] The faux-naïve tone is part of Plath's achievement in *Ariel*— In 'Daddy' an innocent speaker is again menaced by forces she personifies as nursery-rhyme ghouls.

[28] Stan Smith: 'Attitudes Counterfeiting Life: The Irony of Artifice in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*' in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989), p. 35

[29] Smith, 'Attitudes Counterfeiting Life,' in Bloom, ed., *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, p. 35

the fore.'[31] However, she argues, 'I would simply add that this discrepancy need not be read as an aesthetic failure, but rather as an entirely successful strategy on the part of Plath aimed at pointing out to her readers that we cannot have the fiction of apple-pie happiness without some real worms in it.'[32] Bronfen's argument ignores the crucial point at which, I would argue, Plath's ironic technique falters. Towards the end of her rehabilitation, Esther encounters the 'ugly and bespectacled, but intelligent' Irwin and decides to cast him in the role of deliverer from her unwanted virginity. Esther states, 'I decided to practise my new, normal personality on this man.'[33] Earlier in the novel Esther's mother has been cruelly satirised for her impossibly moralistic and uncomprehending reaction to Esther's psychological difficulties: 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again.'[34] But what the novel implies is *precisely* that it has been Esther's own decision to get well. In the world of *The Bell Jar*, 'normal' is merely another role Esther can assume and manipulate with demonstrable skill. Faced with what she imagines to be the terrible alternative to re-socialisation (the fairy-tale horror of eventual incarceration in a cage in the basement of a state psychiatric hospital), Esther chooses to pick up exactly where she has left off. The most disturbing element of the novel is that at its close nothing has changed for the protagonist. The growth in self-knowledge and insight one expects from a novel of crisis has failed to materialise. 'Cure' is viewed not as a form of internal healing, but rather as a test one must pass in order to re-join the competitive society beyond the asylum walls. *The Bell Jar* depicts an encompassing dystopia to which it is clear there is no viable alternative. At the core of the novel is a nihilism which is avoided only by denial, a willed redirection of the gaze.[35] Suicide is represented as a last-ditch attempt of the will to avoid coming face to face with this deeper, unspoken reality, not the outcome of having already confronted it. It is this denial at the heart of the novel which constitutes its most overt aesthetic flaw—as though *The Bell Jar* should have been a much more serious and comprehensive novel of social ideas, but

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[30] Pat MacPherson: *Reflecting on The Bell Jar* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 96
[31] Elisabeth Bronfen: *Sylvia Plath*, (London: Northcote House / British Council, 1998), p. 124
[32] Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 124
[33] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 238
[34] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 154
[35] There are obvious similarities with Wallace Stevens' 'The Emperor of Ice Cream' here, in which the speaker demonstrates his consciously ironic and willed participation in a fiction by means of a redirected gaze: 'Let the lamp affix its beam. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.' Stevens, *Collected Poems,* p. 64

was instead mistakenly compromised by an authorial concession to the humorous, jaunty, and reassuring language of popular women's fiction in which it is couched. It is a work which studiously avoids admitting its own deepest implications.

Esther implies that part of her problem is due to her immediate genetic and social inheritance:

> My mother spoke German during her childhood in America and was stoned for it during the First World War by the children at school. My German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia. My younger brother was at that moment on the Experiment in International Living in Berlin and speaking German like a native.[36]

Unlike H.D.'s Her, Esther feels alienated from her European inheritance, but at the same time she has a stereotypical immigrant's mentality. She is relentlessly and unquestioningly ambitious, has a strongly acquisitive side, and is desirous above all to attain to Harding-esque 'normalcy.' She dimly feels herself to be part of a great social experiment, any deviation from which is punishable by the Orwellian 'worst thing in the world': electrocution.[37] A sensed cultural alienation, which Plath examined more explicitly in some of her shorter prose works,[38] is perhaps a strong motive in Esther's all-encompassing drive to conform to American expectations. But in Esther's case the alienation is doubled: she can neither identify with her German/Austrian heritage like the rest of her family, nor believe any longer in the fantasy of American identity from which her jerry-built personality derives. Again, the novel displays acute similarities with the themes of *Her*, whose heroine, conversely, emphasises the diversity and richness of her European-American inheritance. The social homogenisation ('Uncle Sam pressing people down in test tubes') sensed and evaded by Hermione is fully realised in *The Bell Jar*, and the 'false self' of Esther Greenwood is one of its products.

The Bell Jar's satire of standard Americanness is developed by means of an underlying racial-religious theme. Esther Greenwood's hotel is within sight of the

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[36] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p.34

[37] Plath quotes directly from Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* here; the protagonist of that novel finds out that the mysterious Room 101 contains 'the worst thing in the world.' In his case it is rats. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1989), p. 296

[38] See 'The Shadow' (1959) and 'America! America!' (1963) from *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 330 and 34.

UN building. When she is taken there by Constantin the simultaneous interpreter she is intimidated by 'a stern muscular Russian girl with no make-up...rattling off idiom after idiom in her own unknowable tongue'[39] and her observation of 'the whole bunch of back and white and yellow men arguing down there behind their labelled microphones'[40] induces profound self-doubt. Heterogeneity itself seems to shock and exhaust her—she has begun to sense the inadequacy and narrowness of the American ideal in which she has been raised. Earlier she had mistaken her face in the elevator mirror for someone of another race: 'I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course.'[41] Later she describes herself as 'yellower than ever.' Yellow symbolises cowardice, especially in American colloquial usage, and Esther (unlike Hermione Gart's 'subtle form of courage'[42]) is gradually losing her nerve. But it is no coincidence that her distorted self-perceptions involve racial deviations from Buddy Willard's sexual ideal of 'free, white and twenty-one.' During her train journey back to the suburbs she notices that 'the face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian.'[43] It is a prelude to the total loss of face resulting from her suicide attempt:

> You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner.
>
> The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours.
>
> I smiled.
>
> The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.[44]

In gruesomely comic fashion, this illustrates how thin the veneer of Esther's 'self' and her culture is. The inability to accept her sexual destiny as a woman has contributed to her breakdown and she is now literally incapable of self-identification. However the novel's most explicitly 'racial' episode takes place during Esther's stay

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[39] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* pp. 79
[40] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 79
[41] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 19
[42] H.D., *Her*, p. 4
[43] Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 119
[44] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 183-184

at the city psychiatric hospital while her paranoia (insofar as it may be inferred from the narrative) is at its height, and illustrates clearly the imprisoning immediacy of her perceptions. Esther is having dinner with the other psychiatric patients on the ward. It is served by 'the Negro,' who emerges from the text as a grotesque racial stereotype. He 'kept grinning and chuckling in a silly way,' and 'he gawped at us with big, rolling eyes.'[45] Esther peremptorily orders him to wait until the other patients have eaten before collecting the plates:

> 'Mah, mah!' The Negro widened his eyes in mock wonder. He glanced round. The nurse had not yet returned from locking up Mrs. Mole. The Negro made me an insolent bow. 'Miss Mucky-Muck,' he said under his breath.[46]

When Esther discovers that the third tureen contains more beans, she thinks 'I knew perfectly well you didn't serve two kinds of beans together at a meal...the Negro was just trying to see how much we would take.'[47] Given the novel's studious avoidance of self-commentary and analysis, there are no clues about how to interpret this passage. 'The Negro' appears in the traditional role of domestic servant. His portrayal as childlike and underhand is part of a familiar white racial stereotype, but it is a behaviour in which Esther participates as a stereotypical lunatic. Esther's racist reaction, and the racist language with which the event is described, demonstrate her horror at her social situation. To be lower on the social ladder than a Negro menial brings home to Esther just how much she stands in danger of losing by becoming insane. The kick she administers[48] is less an illustration of how mad she is (and her 'madness' is decidedly unconvincing throughout, appearing as a form of comic obstinacy) than a means for her to reassure herself that even mad white women are superior to poor blacks in the social pecking order. Later, after she herself is punished by being locked up, she sees 'the Negro's face, a molasses-coloured moon, risen at the window grating, but I pretended not to notice.'[49] If Esther were a

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[45] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 189
[46] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.191
[47] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 191
[48] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 191
[49] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 192 Esther's 'madness' is strangely unconvincing, as she portrays herself as deliberately refractory. The mercury drop which she steals from the broken thermometers becomes an image of the god-like control she feels she has over her own personality: 'If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of myself, and if I pushed them near each other, they

convincing 'lunatic' then her behaviour might be excusable, but it is hard for the reader not to side with her mother in identifying her actions as wilful and devious.

What is clear is that the asylum is really America in microcosm, a model which she can master in preparation for the greater task of mastery which awaits her when she is 'well,' i.e. re-socialised. The 'space' of the asylum contrasts strongly with the gestatory spaces of H.D.'s poetic. In effect, it is a mother-substitute, a space of hierarchical re-socialisation without the deathly connotations of the (s)mothering womb, which I analyse in greater detail below. Furthermore, this racial episode in *The Bell Jar* is an early hint of what was to become a full-blown controversy regarding Plath's late poems. Is the episode simply a piece of unreconstructed racism used for comic effect? Is it a serious and ironically-presented comment on social hierarchies? Or are the racial episodes in *The Bell Jar* to be seen not as sociological comments, but as stages in the interior drama of Esther's disintegration and reintegration? The 'Negro' is not the only stereotype Plath uses in *The Bell Jar*. The prevalence of reductive stereotypes in the novel has been commented upon by Bronfen, who writes:

> By thus disclosing how her heroine's fantasies of self-destructions are as much clichés as the stories of feminine success and good living against which they are pitted, Plath undermines the cultural formations on which they depend. The impasse of her heroine's death plot is such that it places Esther between a vast archive of clichéd images of death and the void of real non-existence, utterly outside all symbolization and all fantasy work.[50]

However, I would contend that Plath never allows Esther to step outside the cultural formations that Bronfen claims she is satirising. The reason the novel's 'triumphant' ending is unconvincing is because, in escaping death, Esther has avoided the only alternative the novel can suggest to those cultural formations. Esther fears that marriage is a kind of 'private, totalitarian state'[51] when in fact she already carries that state around inside her own uncompromising and intolerant consciousness. MacPherson's interpretation of Plath's use of stereotypes (which I also examine in her poetry, see below) is more accurate: 'Esther's—and Plath's—

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would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again.' (Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 193) Or is this control simply part of her delusion?

[50] Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 120

[51] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 90

crude use of doubles as deniability-dummies (Hilda's the bitch; Doreen's the nymphomaniac; Joan's the lesbian) shows how naively pragmatic their version of psychic housekeeping could be. The cattiness of competitive femininity in adolescence, so richly documented in the writing of Sylvia Plath, is a measure of the vast instability of femininity as identity.'[52] It is possible to view Plath's stereotyping as of a piece with her mythical concerns, so strongly to the fore in the gender preoccupation of her poetry. In *The Bell Jar*, as in the poetry, it is an example of the difficulties her work has with its construction of stable identities or selves. And a consciousness which reduces itself and its Others to cartoon characters is always in danger of falling into transgressive, if not outright offensive, misrepresentations.

Because of her broader, mythopoeic technique, H.D.'s treatment of the racial theme contrasts greatly with Plath's. The Gart family employ a black domestic servant, Mandy, whom Her finds stoning cherries in the kitchen. They are wild cherries from a bush which their black gardener, Tim, had neglected to pick. Her defends Tim and insists that the cherries are bitter, but Mandy disagrees: 'I tell you no black man is ever good at picking. I tell you Tim done miss the best tree.'[53] Far from affecting a superiority to Mandy, Her is in fact pleasantly influenced by her:

> "Cherry picking isn't rightly part of gardening." Her fell into the rhythm of Mandy's speech, the moment she began to speak to Mandy. "A gardener is a gardener, a black gardener is as good as a white gardener. There's no need *dis*-criminating." Mandy would appreciate that last affectation.[54]

This passage hinges around the word 'discriminating.' Mandy refuses to discriminate between the wild cherry tree and the domestic cherry tree (the imagery here is almost biblical). But even Mandy the black servant mouths conventional discrimination against Tim the black gardener. 'Discrimination' in this sense is of a belated kind, linked with the taste and discrimination shown by the Philadelphia ladies who possess an 'Anglo-shabby air of trite repudiation.'[55] Their petty snobberies (it is implied) lead to pedantic distinctions and an obsession with degree, which is of course precisely what Hermione has failed to obtain: '"I mean, Nellie at

[52] McPherson, *Reflecting on The Bell Jar,* p. 85
[53] H.D., *Her*, p.26
[54] H.D., *Her,* p.26

Bryn Mawr wrote brilliantly about him," Nellie had written brilliantly about Henry James, done a thesis, taken a degree. Degree, degree, degree...Hermione went up like the mercury in the thermometer.'[56] There are several important points which can be developed from the extracts above. Firstly, Hermione realises the enormity of the gulf which exists between the superficial social intercourse she is oppressed by while taking tea in Nellie Thorpe's drawing room, and a vaster poetic-mythological 'truth,' which she is barely able to discriminate underneath her everyday life. Mandy's insistence that '"These yere makes better jam than others"' is resisted by Her, who nevertheless defers to her superior wisdom on the subject of jam-making. The split between Hermione's speech which is on the side of rational understanding and her continuous interior monologue which doubts rationalism is clear. She begins to recognise something more basic in Mandy than even Mandy herself can see:

> Mandy had her formula. This, this, this. Fish, somedays, weren't eatable. Berries, certain days, weren't worth picking. Sun rose and sun set. The rising of the Pleiades, things out of Virgil, things out of Hesiod, influenced Mandy. "Nonsense." The kids, the Hyades, the Pleiades. Things out of Virgil made Mandy cook beans on Tuesday.[57]

In this she contrasts strongly with Esther Greenwood, who can see no alternative to conformity, unless it is suicide. Her's behaviour becomes more and more erratic and eventually her consciousness of failure and her revolt against conventional destiny will also lead to breakdown. But she is never, crucially, suicidal. Instead her breakdown, though also an illness with worrying symptoms, represents a fracture of her conventional self, a release of vision and interior voice into speech. It provides a release from the genteel repression she has experienced throughout the novel.

Mandy functions as a kind of muse, representing an ancient female (maternal) principle. Hermione has another intuition of this earlier in the novel, during a breakfast scene with her mother Eugenia in a room dimmed by the torrential rain outside:

> "Mandy's different..." "Shsssh..." Mandy (exquisite bronze) was a

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[55] H.D., *Her,* p. 57
[56] H.D., *Her,* p.59
[57] H.D., *Her,* p.27

> brazier burning in that bleak room. Mandy was a bronze like a brazier (they—Hermione, Eugenia—were bottle-green) but Hermione couldn't say it. Eugenia was shushing at Hermione, not wanting her to say it. I can't say Mandy is a bronze. I can't say Mandy looks like Etruscan bronze dredged from the mid-Ionian with colour flashing against her polished bronze...I won't say Mandy is like a bronze giving out iridescence like a flying fish, there is a blue-green iridescence across the copper polish and her face is fixed like a bronze face, her eyes are set in like agates in a Mena-period Egyptian effigy. I won't say that. I must say, "What Mandy—not more hot cakes?"[58]

Her has a glimpse of Mandy as a symbol of something more profound and more ancient, linking her to the eternal recurrence of mythological patterns. Significantly, this is also the part of the novel in which Her's mother Eugenia reminisces about the circumstances of her daughter's birth, which reconciles them after their previous quarrels: '*Unless you are born of water...unless you are born of water*...they were born of water, reincarnated, all their past million-of-years-ago quarrel forgotten in the firelight.'[59] In this passage also, she conceives of herself as being 'enclosed as in a ball of glass.' As I have shown, H.D. was later to make this gestation-image a central part of her mature poetic, and it is the underlying theme of her war-time memoir, *The Gift*, in which memories of her maternal Moravian inheritance surface, or are forced to the surface by 'the daemonic drive released by psychoanalysis...and the Second World War.'[60] Helped by her own analysis and wide reading in psychology, H.D. in *The Gift* realises that not only personal but racial memories and rituals remain buried as a source of hurt but also redemptive potential in the psyche: 'it went on happening, it did not stop.'[61] For H.D. this technique is also a way of escaping belated and invidious racial or gender categorisations. The portrayal of Mandy in *Her* is, for example, very reminiscent of Langston Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', and at a time when racial tension in the United States was particularly high (many blacks had migrated from the South during the First World War in order to fill the labour shortage in northern American cities) can be

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[58] H.D., *Her,* p.88
[59] H.D., *Her,* p. 99
[60] letter from H.D. to Norman Holmes Pearson of 14 October, 1959; Beinecke Library, Yale. Quoted in Diana Collecott, introduction to H.D., *The Gift* (London: Virago Press, 1984), p. ix
[61] *The Gift*, (London: Virago Press, 1984), p.48

seen as a political gesture.[62] Moreover the race theme in *Her* is linked to the wider theme of gender categorisation, a fact which both Hermione Gart and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* must both confront.

It is implied that the hypocrisy and double-standards of Esther's relationship with the medical student Buddy Willard (that 'fine, clean boy' from a 'fine, clean family'[63]) are partially responsible for her illness. The novel begins *in medias res* and the details of the relationship unfold in a series of flashbacks. Esther's biggest shock is in discovering that Buddy was 'pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face.'[64] Her discovery of Buddy's affair comes directly after her observation of the woman, Mrs. Tomolillo, giving birth.[65] The scene is described with fascinated but horrified detachment:

> The woman's stomach stuck up so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups, and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise.
>
> Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep.[66]

Esther thinks that this is 'just like the sort of drug a man would invent.'[67] The woman's identity has been effaced, not only is her head invisible but even her swearing and groaning are 'split off' and denied as a genuine response, since this is socially undesirable behaviour. But it is the denial of pain itself which Esther finds most sinister. She envisages it as a forced repression, a trick devised in order to deny women free choice: 'she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some

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[62] H.D. would shortly afterwards act opposite Paul Robeson in Kenneth MacPherson's film *Borderline*, which takes inter-racial relationships as its theme. See Guest, *Herself Defined*, pp. 196-201

[63] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, pp. 71-72

[64] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 75

[65] Significantly, a 'Mrs. Tomolillo' mysteriously appears as a comically recalcitrant daughter-in-law in the bed beside Esther on the psychiatric ward after her suicide attempt. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 185

[66] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 69

[67] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 69

secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.'[68] With Buddy Willard's affair, it is not the fact that he has slept with someone which bothers her but the doubleness which results. The conspiratorial impersonality and masculine professionalism of the maternity ward are seen as similarly hypocritical. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, maternity is figured as a prison. Either the girl might fail to differentiate herself sufficiently from her mother, or else she might become imprisoned by the unwanted fertility of her own body. The sexual double-standard feeds Esther's paranoia and contributes to the sexual crisis which precipitates her breakdown.

In the single-sex environment of the hospital, under the treatment of Dr. Nolan, a permissive mother-figure whom she must learn to love (and the only character to emerge from *The Bell Jar* with any credit), Esther encounters her former acquaintance Joan Gilling, who has been 'inspired' by Esther's example into her own breakdown. Reading the newspaper-clippings about her own case that Joan has saved gives Esther a necessary detachment from the experience for the first time since her incarceration. Joan functions as a crude double or foil to Esther, a bench-mark against which Esther can now measure her own recovery: 'Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through...'[69] But Joan also represents a denial of her heterosexual destiny. Joan is a former girlfriend of Buddy Willard, but reveals to Esther that she was interested not in Buddy, but in his family and in particular his conservative mother. This fascinates and repels Esther, for whom Joan's mother-identification is linked with her lesbianism. Esther's own breakdown has been characterised as a regression, a desire to return to the womb or a pre-conscious state, and is finally and definitively sparked off by having to live in close proximity to her own mother. Indeed, regression to the maternal in Plath is repeatedly associated with death, as when she writes of Esther's return from New York: 'I stepped from the air-conditioned compartment on to the station platform, and the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me...A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death.'[70] In this scheme of things,

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[68] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 69
[69] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p. 231
[70] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 120

Joan perhaps seals her own fate by her female object-choice, which possibility is never seriously considered by Esther. Given Plath's later identification of 'barren women' with death,[71] Joan's convenient demise is perhaps inevitable. When Joan makes a clumsy sexual advance, Esther's response is decisive: 'I like you.' 'That's tough, Joan,' I said, picking up my book. 'Because I don't like you. You make me puke, if you want to know.'[72] Doctor Nolan's laughing dismissal of the purity-cult as 'propaganda' and her writing of a prescription for a contraceptive come as an immense relief to Esther and confirm her in her sexual choice. Her later sanguinary heterosexual initiation and Joan's naively uncomprehending assistance mark Esther out as definitively freed from the twin burdens of virginity and unwanted pregnancy. Joan's suicide follows very shortly afterwards, and it is as if Esther's actions have in some way caused it; as though Joan was the lingering ghost of sexual inadequacy finally routed by Esther: 'all during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying...I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.'[73]

The sexual choices which confront Hermione Gart are similar, although her alternatives are not as sharply defined as Esther Greenwood's (as I have suggested, it is as if the wide choice available to Esther is actively deleterious to her self-realization). Hermione experiences many of the same bell jar symptoms, the primary one being a strange etiolation of the will. She identifies George Lowndes as a possible route of escape, a way to avoid being (s)mothered:

> When Eugenia said "You said he was in Venice" in that tone of accusation, Hermione knew she must formulate George Lowndes. It was going to be very difficult to formulate George, to concentrate enough to get an image of George, to say "I hate George" or to say "I love George." She perceived heat lightning wavering above the Farrand oak trees and realised that now was the moment for some definition.[74]

George Lowndes (the young Ezra Pound) has been involved in a scandal with a young woman in a mid-western college. He has recently returned to "Gawd's own

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[71] See 'Barren Woman' in Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 157.
[72] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* p.232
[73] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 256
[74] H.D., *Her*, p.44

god-damn country"[75] from Italy and is trying to persuade Her to return to Europe with him. Her recognises the opportunity for escape that George offers, but the narrative implies that her feelings for him represent another kind of dependence, perhaps a more dangerous one:

> She wanted George as a child wants a doll, whose other dolls are broken. She wanted George as a little girl wants to put her hair up or to wear long skirts…She wanted George to say, "God, you must give up this sort of putrid megalomania, get out of this place." She knew sooner or later George would begin his prodding and sooner or later, she must make up her mind.[76]

It is George's very unconventionality and her mother's disapproval of him that Her finds attractive. Nevertheless his 'definition' of her is oddly dualistic: "You never manage to look decently like other people. You look like a Greek goddess or a coal scuttle."[77] In some part of her unformulated consciousness Her realises that to give herself completely to George, to accept his definition of her in place of the greater effort of defining herself would be destructive. Her relationship with him is similarly dualistic, a combination of attraction and repulsion, admiration and annoyance. For her George is 'so beautiful' but also 'piglike.' His kisses 'smudged out her clear geometric thought but his words had given her something.'[78] The underlying theme of the novel, indicated by Her's (ostensibly narcissistic) preoccupation with mirrors, with water, with her own name 'Her' and with the imagery of concentric circles, is the theme of unity. Her's relationship with George can never bring her a feeling of fulfilled unity, as the surrealistic imagery of chapter eight, section nine indicates. As George is kissing her she notices how like his mother Lilian he looks:

> Her heard words praising Lilian, she saw George looking in some odd way like her. She said "Lilian is beautiful"; the back of her head and the front of her head acted together and she said again "Lilian looked beautiful." The back of her head prompted the front of her head, slid a fraction of a fraction (of a tiny measurement on a thermometer or a microscope) away from the front of her head, actually almost with a little click, separated from the front of her head like amoeba giving birth by separation to amoeba. "Some plants, some small water creatures

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[75] H.D., *Her,* p. 34
[76] H.D., *Her*, p.63
[77] H.D., *Her*, p.64
[78] H.D., *Her,* p.73

> give a sort of jellyfish sort of birth by breaking apart, by separating themselves from themselves." George's kisses stopped her. "Oh God, hamadryad, forget all that rot." Rot? Was it all rot?[79]

The imagery of self-birth, of amoeba-like separation is an image of parturition which is self-propelled, requiring no (male) sexual intervention. It is also an extremely resonant image, relating as it does to the 'jellyfish' state of consciousness which H.D. experienced on the Scilly isles in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, an experience she theorises in *Notes on Thought and Vision*. It is worth considering this image in greater detail, since it is linked to the notion of transcendent or emergent consciousness I have already examined in the previous chapter. In the later *Advent*, H.D. recalled her experience:

> I had what Bryher called the 'jelly-fish' experience of double-ego; bell-jar or half-globe as of transparent glass spread over my head like a diving-bell and another manifested from my feet, so enclosed I was for a short space in St. Mary's, Scilly Isles, July 1918, immunised or insulated from the war disaster.[80]

In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, H.D. links the phenomenon with what she calls the 'over-mind', a transcendent state of consciousness which acts like a lens, readjusting one's perception of reality:

> If I could visualise or describe that over-mind in my own case, I should say this: it seems to me that a cap is over my head, a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes. Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water. Ordinary things never become quite unreal or disproportionate. It is only an effort to readjust, to focus, seemingly a slight physical effort.[81]

Significantly, H.D. relates this experience to the loving and fertile body, stressing that it is not purely a psychological projection: 'I first realised this state of consciousness in my head. I visualise it just as well, now, centred in the love-region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body.'[82] Although she describes the over-mind as a 'bell-jar' in *Advent*, the jelly-fish image she applies to it in the earlier work

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[79] H.D., *Her,* p.118 The fact that this results from Hermione's memory of George's mother (almost a parallel of the Esther/Joan incident) is one of the more pointed of the coincidences between the two novels.

[80] H.D., *Advent*, in *Tribute to Freud*, p. 116

[81] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982), p. 18

[82] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision,* p. 19

stresses its innate organicism. It is similar yet wholly different in its implication to Plath's bell jar image, which symbolises a deathly, stifling enclosure. Directly after contemplating her neighbour Dodo Conway's complacent maternity, Esther attempts to phone the university admissions office in a desperate attempt to escape spending her summer in the motherly suburbs. It is at this moment that the bell jar imagery comes fully into play: ' My hand advanced a few inches, then retreated and fell limp. I forced it towards the receiver again, but again it stopped short, as if it had collided with a pane of glass.'[83] The bell jar represents mental illness and the extreme alienation that entails, but on a more fundamental level it is an image of the imprisoning womb, the maternal space from which the individual self struggles to be born. The most potent image of this in Plath's later work occurs in 'Medusa', where the maternal body is 'fat and red, a placenta/ Paralysing the kicking lovers.'[84] The medusa is also, by a startling coincidence, a kind of jelly-fish, involving a buried pun on her own mother's name.[85]

For H.D. the image also represents maternity, but for her it is a liberating and wholly positive realisation: 'the brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important.'[86] Indeed, H.D. explicitly links this unique form of consciousness to her own experience of pregnancy, asking: 'Is it easier for a woman to attain this state of consciousness than for a man? For me, it was before the birth of my child that the jelly-fish consciousness seemed to come definitely into the field or realm of the intellect or brain.'[87] With her utopian impulses, H.D. views this experience as useful, opening up possibilities of new perceptions, new avenues of vision. I also discern a similarity with her later visionary experiences in Corfu, which Freud helped clarify by reminding her that she was physically in Hellas, in Helen (her mother) when she experienced them. In 1918 H.D. was on the Scilly Isles with Bryher, who had taken her adopted name from one of the islands. Albert Gelpi

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[83] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 126

[84] Plath, 'Medusa' in *Collected Poems*, p.224

[85] Stevenson writes: 'With the queer, subversive spite that characterises these confessional poems, Sylvia gave in the poem's title a clue that Aurelia Plath could not fail to pick up. "Medusa"—in Greek mythology the Gorgon who turned all beholders to stone—is also the name of a species of jellyfish, *aurela*. Mrs. Plath had once joked with Sylvia about her name, which had two meanings, "golden" and "jellyfish." Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 266

[86] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*, p. 21

[87] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision,* p. 20

describes Bryher as 'the woman who had mothered her [H.D.] and the child she had borne',[88] so it could be said that H.D. experienced the Scilly Isles (including the island of Bryher) as a protective maternal enclosure in much the same way as she had the island of Corfu. What is paradoxical about this complex image is that a figure of enclosure can simultaneously function as a means of emergence. However, this is clarified by a consideration of Bachelard's description of 'intimate immensity':

> Immensity is within ourselves...the poet goes deeper when he uncovers a poetic space that does not enclose us in affectivity. Indeed, whatever the affectivity that colours a given space, whether sad or ponderousness, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened. Poetic space, because it is expressed, assumes values of expansion...In this activity of poetic spatiality that goes from deep intimacy to infinite extent, united in an identical expansion, one feels grandeur welling up...It would seem, then, that it is through their "immensity" that these two kinds of space—the space of intimacy and world space—blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical...[89]

H.D. links her maternal 'over-mind' with the perceptions of great artists and spiritual leaders of the past and the future, thus connecting her subjective spatial experience with 'world space,' much as Bachelard has identified it. She thus evades the imprisoning implications of her image, turning it into a figure of transcendent consciousness. Significantly, H.D. does not regard her bell-jar experience as a symptom. Much as she later will with Freud, she disagrees here with the unnamed Havelock Ellis's diagnosis:

> I spoke to a scientist, a psychologist, about my divisions of mind and over-mind. He said that over-mind was not exactly the right term, that sub-conscious mind was the phrase I was groping for. I have thought for a long time about the comparative values of these terms and I see at last my fault and his. We were both wrong. I was about to cover too much of the field of abnormal consciousness by the term over-mind. He, on the other hand, would have called it all sub-conscious mind. But the sub-conscious and the over-conscious are entirely different states, entirely different worlds.[90]

This passage again emphasises H.D.'s fundamental difference with psychoanalytic interpretations of art and consciousness, which I have already examined in the

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[88] Albert Gelpi, introduction to H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision,* p. ii
[89] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 201-202
[90] H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*, pp. 48-49

previous chapter. The usefulness of this analysis lies in the extent to which it provides a contrast with Plath's use of similar imagery in *The Bell Jar* and in her poetry. Plath's bell jar is an involuntary state of alienation, a condition of regression which is to be feared. It is only after a course of ECT (which has earlier been linked to social coercion and punishment) and a psychoanalytic 'cure' which involves the repudiation of her pathological symptoms that Esther is released from it: 'the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.'[91] All the same she fears that at some point in the future, it will descend again, with its 'stifling distortions.' While H.D. is at ease with her bell jar, Esther hates and fears the alienation from her society (which she seems at odds with anyway) *her* bell jar entails.

The jelly-fish image's link with Hermione's fluid sexuality in *Her* is clear: the 'amoeba' experience of momentary unity and then disunity while George kisses her relates directly to her earlier perception of the mirrored back of Fayne Rabb's head in Nellie Thorpe's drawing room. This image concretises as a healing of the rift in her own psyche initially embodied as the insuperable difference between Nellie Thorpe and George: 'Two people utterly inapposite, never coming together at all in any compartment of her compartmented mind. My mind is breaking up like molecules in test tubes. Molecules all held together, breaking down in this furnace heat.'[92] The maternal image is also linked to H.D.'s realisation of her own bisexuality, and becomes an image of the fully realised self. Her finds that no effort of 'formulation' is required for Fayne, in the way that her exhausted intellect had earlier felt the need to formulate George. It is at this moment that the absence of descriptive or explanatory terminology is turned to Her's advantage. She must mark out this new interior space, find words with which to describe the changes in her own consciousness. An unforced effort of originality is required.

Her's erratic, stream-of consciousness speech is mirrored by the speech of Fayne, who in Her's company seems to find an escape from her shabby-genteel background and dependent mother. Her recognises Fayne as a kind of prophetess, simultaneously feeling herself for the first time to have some purchase on the future, an inkling of control over her own destiny: 'shuffling the letters like a fortune teller's

[91] *The Bell Jar*, p. 227

cards, she abstracted the one apparently most unprepossessing.'[93] Similarly, she interprets Fayne's 'prophecies' as though she were an oracle: 'She felt concentration hold, her head go hard, she would follow Fayne into the space beyond space. "You can't *see* what I see." "No, Fayne. I don't pretend to."'[94] This opening up of Her's horizon into a vision of futurity is an important stage in her artistic development, and links to what I have called the 'utopian' space of possibility envisaged in Dickinson's poetry. H.D. interweaves 'prophetic' elements into the text of *Her* by including references to her later poetry and prose, as though allowing her younger self to foresee the creative task ahead.[95] Thus the consciousness of Her Gart transcends its particular moment, overflows the boundaries of the text. This is the 'narrative way forward'[96] noted by Helen McNeil and contrasts strongly with the airless, trapped self portrayed in *The Bell Jar*. One of Esther's worst symptoms is the psychotic featurelessness of her vision of the future.[97] Yet there is more than a hint of the charlatan about Fayne, who is hectoring on the subject of the self: '"Why do you say yes Fayne, why do you say, no Fayne? Have you no reality, no voice, no articulate self?"'[98] It is important to bear in mind that Fayne is, largely, what Hermione makes of her. The relationship is intensely erotic, if equally intensely sublimated. Her has earlier seen Fayne as the statue in an amateur production of Pygmalion, and now visualises her in a highly eroticised image as a statue (like Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, another mirror-image[99]) which she will bring to life:

> Curtains part as I look into the eyes of Fayne Rabb. "And I—I'll make you breathe, my breathless statue." "Statue? You—*you* are the statue." Curtains fell, curtains parted, curtains filled the air with heavy swooping purple.

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[92] H.D., *Her*., p.31
[93] H.D., *Her*, p.127
[94] H.D., *Her,* p.161
[95] The Hellenic references function as an echo of the work to come, and there are more direct references too, as in the 'jellyfish' image of consciousness, the 'writing on the wall' image which occurs in section ten of chapter 8, (later to be written about in *Tribute to Freud*) and her use of the phrase 'whirl up', a deliberate echo of one of her best known 'Imagist' poems 'Oread.'
[96] McNeil, introduction to H.D., *Her*, p. ix
[97] See her description of insomnia on p. 123: 'I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue.'
[98] H.D., *Her,* p.177
[99] H.D. is also, in a sense, foreshadowing her own motherhood in the text. Her daughter was named Perdita.

Lips long since half kissed away.[100]

Linking H.D.'s Hellenism to a textual encoding of lesbian desire, Diana Collecott has noted the significance of this statue imagery. She writes: 'Long before her suppression of woman-identified material in *Helen in Egypt*, and her reinscription of heterosexual legend in *Hermetic Definition*, H.D. was exploring in fiction the psychopathology of inversion by means of statuesque metaphors.'[101] This is undoubtedly the case in H.D.'s portrayal of the Fayne-Her relationship—in the above passage, for example, the images of lips and parting curtains inevitably evoke the female genitalia—but the very textual dynamic of *Her* (and of very many of H.D.'s other works) is more fluid and evasive of categorisation than this statement by Collecott would imply.[102]

However, in the end Her begins to feel her fragile identity is dangerously merged with that of Fayne: 'I will not have her hurt. I will not have Her hurt. She is Her. I am Her. Her is Fayne. Fayne is Her. I will not let them hurt HER.'[103] Cynthia Hogue has written about H.D.'s analysis of the problems women have encountered in constituting themselves as speaking subjects, noting that in the late work *Helen in Egypt* 'Helen's self-inscription effectively divides her into the subject and object of her discourse—the one evasive and self-differing, the other the specularized object of the male gaze.'[104] Something similar is at work here—Her's name indicates that she is both subject and object of this autobiographical text, at the same time as it explodes the (male) myth of the masterful, unified self. But her name also has a more general symbolic function, as Helen McNeil has noted: 'The character Her has the special creative receptivity that H.D.'s memoir called 'the gift' but her name is the name of all women.'[105] After the overwrought Hermione has a final and decisive row with George Lowndes on discovering his betrayal with Fayne, she lapses into an illness characterised by feverish (and very modernist) verbal free-association. It

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[100] H.D., *Her*, p.163
[101] Collecott: *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism*, p. 62
[102] Although Collecott does acknowledge this aspect of the novel later in the same passage: 'H.D.'s early effort in *Her*...produced a text that continually undercuts itself, being at one and the same time homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual.' Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism*, p. 63.
[103] H.D., *Her,* p.181
[104] Hogue, Cynthia Ann: *Figuring Woman Out: Feminine Subjectivity in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and H.D.* Ph.D. Thesis, University of Arizona, 1990, p. 89
[105] McNeil, introduction to H.D., *Her,* p. x

represents a kind of 'talking cure,' at the end of which Her reaches a kind of resolution:

> In order to be faithful I will forego faith, I will creep back into the shell in order to emerge full fledged, a bird, a phoenix. I will creep back now in order to creep out later...I have been faithful, said Her Gart, feeling that the moment was about to pass into all moments, the great majority of moments that are dead moments[106]

The realisation contained in this passage echoes the movement of the book as a whole: it is not linear and direct, but circular and gradual. This image of the cyclical re-emergence of a self is strongly reminiscent of the images of the maternal chrysalis or shell which I have already analysed in chapter three. It also differs in significant ways with Esther Greenwood's image of her re-emergent self at the end of *The Bell Jar*: 'There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice - patched, retreaded and approved for the road.'[107]

The final, snow-bound scenes of both novels provide instructively contrasting images of resolution or non-resolution. The selves which have emerged from their respective trials are very different in nature. Hermione has achieved a state of mind in which she can calmly consider her future:

> All about her peace said snow falls and petals fall, and the fury in Her had been appeased and things had happened as she had foreseen, as she had hoped standing that black night upstairs looking out on Gart terrace. lawn had been black and heat lightning had scarred an irate heaven, but now earth lay flat and was spread with white on white. Everything had been erased, would be written on presently. White spread across an earth, purified for its fulfilment... "Three months is a long time. I have almost missed winter."[108]

The image of the snow covered landscape as a palimpsest, an erased text to be written over, is again prophetic, given the later importance of this figure in H.D.'s work. Her's purgation of feeling is linked to the seasonal purification of the earth by snowfall. This implies that her recent experiences are not denied or pushed down in the psyche as a frightening aberration, but accepted as part of a cycle. Esther's

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[106] H.D., *Her,* p.221 cf. this image of the cyclical re-emergence of a self with the image of the maternal chrysalis or shell which I analyse in Chapter Three.
[107] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 257

feelings differ, as she regards the snowy landscape: 'But under the deceptively clean and level slate the topography was the same, and instead of San Francisco or Europe or Mars I would be learning the old landscape, brook and hill and tree.'[109] She toys with the idea of denying her memories of the past six months, as her mother suggests: 'We'll take up where we left off, Esther,' she had said, with her sweet martyr's smile. 'We'll act as if all this were a bad dream.'[110] Esther claims her memories, but in fact her image of them is of a permanent underlying threat: 'Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them. But they were part of me. They were my landscape.'[111] The tone of this passage is shot through with wariness, and contrasts sharply with *Her*'s triumphant image of the emergent phoenix. Esther Greenwood has not advanced greatly in self-understanding, but has merely been 'patched', and will return to an identical society demanding identical behaviour. Is this the outcome or the cause of Plath's self-limiting technique of extreme objectivity? Given the novel's autobiographical subject-matter, it is difficult to say with any certainty. In any event the impression it conveys is that no alternative to 'normalisation' exists for Esther, unless it be death. The end of *Her*, on the other hand, is marked by possibility. Her's calm and rational conversation with Jimmie Farrand and his friend Harold who has also experienced academic disappointment allows her to admit for the first time 'I flunked the whole lot.'[112] The young men seem to understand something of Her's predicament, remarking of a mutual acquaintance: 'Funny the way girls give up though. She wears pince-nez and is teaching.'[113] Her's panicked consciousness of the possibility of 'giving up' is what has led to her breakdown. The detachment and objectivity achieved for the first time in her conversation with the young men is felt as a palpable relief, and she begins to formulate vague plans to travel to Europe with them. The novel's great *coup de grace*, however, comes in its final paragraph. The reader has been lulled into a comfortable and conventional sense of conclusion when:

> Practical and at one with herself, with the world, with all outer

[108] H.D., *Her,* p.222
[109] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.249
[110] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.250
[111] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p.250
[112] H.D., *Her*, p.231
[113] H.D., *Her*, p.231

> circumstance, she barged straight into Mandy in the outer hallway.
> "Oh Miss. I thought you was back long since. I done left Miss Fayne
> all alone upstairs in your little workroom."[114]

The unexpected reappearance of Fayne Rabb is symbolic of the novel's resistance to neat closure, and completely subverts the reader's expectations. Its achievement is to leave the narrative intriguingly open-ended, reminding us that this is, after all, a novel about *beginning*, and that therefore its failure to *end* conclusively is wholly in keeping with its provisional tone. This strategy of extreme evasiveness is carried on (as I have shown) by H.D. in both prose and poetry and is a profound underlying link with Dickinson. It functions similarly as a means of resistance to destructive and coercive categorisations. The acute awareness of such forces surrounding the incipient consciousness complicates the style of the narrative. In this way it becomes an adequate mirror of the complexity it seeks not only to describe but also, it is implied, to uphold. The contrast with *The Bell Jar* could not be greater. The determined realism of Plath's style can be seen as a mask rather than a mirror for the self. Since much of the action of the novel is concerned with the failure of imagination under pressure, this significantly implies an inability to maintain consciousness of the self as a coherent entity. Plath's dependence on and attempts to reject the mask become a major theme in my examination of emergent identity in her poetry.

'I Carpenter a Space for the Thing I am Given': Plath's Poetic Enclosures

Sylvia Plath's poem 'The Fearful' provides an arresting image of selves being devoured by their attributes:

> This man makes a pseudonym
> And crawls behind it like a worm.

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[114] H.D., *Her,* p.234

This woman on the telephone
Says she is a man, not a woman.

The mask increases, eats the worm,
Stripes for mouth and eyes and nose,

The voice of the woman hollows—
More and more like a dead one...[115]

The image is that of a fiction taking on an autonomous life of its own, hollowing out or abstracting the living matter of which it was initially composed, in cannibalistic fashion. Throughout Plath's work, the figure of a self subsumed or reduced to its various, separable appurtenances has a counterpart in images of wholeness and intuitions of an essential core of self. The latter trope has been emphasised by those who regard *Ariel* as a triumphant culmination; indeed it may be regarded as the most commonly accepted interpretation of Plath's achievement, although it involves—as had been widely recognised—a strong teleological bias, with the poet's suicide as the inevitable end-point of the process. According to this interpretation of Plath's life and works, the *Ariel* poems represent a triumphant release from years of seemingly fruitless toil, psychological difficulties, and paralysing writer's block. Adherents of this perspective often come (ironically) from widely divergent ideological or critical camps, as Jacqueline Rose has observed. Of Ted Hughes' editing of Plath she writes:

> he [Hughes] presents all Plath's work in terms of a constant teleological reference to *Ariel,* with the result that everything else she produced is more or less offered as waste...Let's already note how close, aesthetically, that notion of the emergent real self is to the feminist reading of Plath in terms of an isolate selfhood that Hughes has also been seen as suppressing.[116]

For Rose, Hughes' claim to identify an essential core of self in Plath is impossible because of the innate doubleness and elusiveness of language as a medium, the 'division internal to language, the difference of writing from itself' or the 'divided and incomplete nature of representation itself.'[117] Such a recognition leads Rose to assert that her examination of the function of fantasy in and about Plath's work will involve discussion of Plath and Hughes as 'textual entities' only:

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[115] 'The Fearful' in *Collected Poems* ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber 1981), p. 256
[116] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, (London: Virago 1997), p. 231

> We do not know Plath (nor indeed Hughes). What we do know is what they give us in writing, and what they give us in writing is there to be read. In this book, in the analysis of those writings, I am never talking of real people, but of textual entities (Y and X) whose more than real reality, I will be arguing, goes beyond them to encircle us all.[118]

The threats of litigation Rose's book provoked from the Plath estate (and which she describes in her preface to the 1997 reprint of the book) prove that Hughes himself took a very different view. Indeed, Rose's study is a timely reminder of the pitfalls of a theoretically blinkered viewpoint when one is dealing with a body of work as powerfully and unavoidably autobiographical as much of Plath's is. Notwithstanding the notorious heavy-handedness of the estate, there is a subtle intellectual dishonesty about claiming pure scientific detachment and then speculating with complete license about the motivations and behaviour of unknown individuals. For one thing it demonstrates the obstinately referential nature of language, or (for the hand-washing theorist) the lamentable determination of readers to look beyond this internally-divided medium to the irreducible and complex realities which lie on the other side of it. Rose's book is an attempt to get around the 'problem' of Plath's work without recourse to either straightforward biographical hagiography or purist neo-New Critical emphasis (tautologous as that is) on 'the work itself.' But—as is so often the case in Plath criticism—while disavowing any referential intent, she seemingly cannot avoid the biographical morass with its inevitable dangers (legal or otherwise). Even more recent studies which attempt to broaden the scope of Plath criticism, such as Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* and Tracy Brain's *The Other Sylvia Plath*, cannot avoid biographical reference, even while they claim to shy away from it. Here, for example, is Kendall on the poem I have cited above:

> This transference of power concludes with 'The Fearful', dated 16 November 1962, which may be the latest surviving poem to address, as its principal subject, the theme of adultery. One of the poem's biographical sources is obvious: reference to the woman on the telephone who 'Says she is a man, not a woman' remembers the incident when Plath answered a telephone call for her husband from Assia Gutman. *The poem does not need to be decoded in this way*: it is already apparent that its title refers not to any abandoned wife, terrified of losing her husband, but to the two lovers who abase themselves with lies and disguises.[119] [italics mine]

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[117] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* p. 5
[118] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* p. 5

Kendall invokes the biographical context only to dismiss it. He then continues with his interpretation of the poem by means of a comparison with the deathly images of perfection in 'The Munich Mannequins', but very quickly slips back into biographical detail. I am reproducing this passage from Kendall's study in full in order to highlight the particular uneasiness Plath's contexts can provoke in even the most ostensibly detached of critics:

> 'The Fearful' has one more, much less obvious, biographical source. Ted Hughes's poem 'Dreamers', published in *Birthday Letters*, reports a dream Assia Gutman recounted while she was staying with Plath and Hughes in Devon, of a pike which held, in each eye, a human foetus. Hughes remembers Plath being 'astonished'; he himself interprets the dream as evidence that Gutman had, without yet realising it, fallen in love with him. The final couplet of 'The Fearful' suggests that Plath also, retrospectively, agreed with Hughes's understanding of the dream's significance; her version, although adapted to fit her own symbolic scheme, is clearly inspired by Gutman's account. 'The Fearful' *is hardly decoded by such information; the logic and unity of its world are too powerful to be explained away by biography.*
> Yet it seems appropriate that this insight into the poem's biographical origins should be deduced not from the poem itself, but from a much more straightforwardly confessional poem, published over thirty years later, by the husband sometimes accused of concealing the truth about Plath's life and work.[120] [Italics mine]

Again, Kendall feels compelled to denigrate the biographical nature of the insight even while he explains the poem by means of it. Not only that, he seemingly accepts without demur the questionable (given the absence of both Plath and Gutman) claim made by Ted Hughes in his poem 'Dreamers'; also the unlikely scenario that Plath somehow sensed and even 'agreed with' Hughes's interpretation of Assia Gutman's dream *at that time*. Despite his assertion that 'everything else [i.e. biographical detail] is relevant only insofar as it illuminates what are at times uncompromisingly difficult texts,'[121] Kendall is clearly engaged in partisan biographical speculation at this point.

Even an important study like Steven Gould *Axelrod's Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1990) cannot avoid the biographical reductionism inherent in the strict psychoanalytical approach. With his prefatory claim: 'a biography of the imagination, this book meditates on Sylvia Plath's struggle for

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[119] Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 109
[120] Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study,* p. 110
[121] Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study,* Preface.

voice,' Axelrod's aim would seem to be similar to that of this thesis. However he begins to sound very like Feit Diehl on Bishop and Moore when he states:

> A sort of transitional object mediating between inner and outer reality...Plath's writing psychically sustained her, just as her mother's nurturing had done during her first years of life. Both satisfied her voracious need for love.[122]

As this passage and even the title of his book indicates, Axelrod views Plath's writing as primarily compensatory in origin: 'Plath conceived of art as a compensation for loss.'[123] Axelrod's study, as he admits, is heavily influenced by Bloom's theories of influence, and upholds the same kind of seamless continuity between the writer's psyche and the text-as-psyche. In a more directly psychoanalytical fashion than Bloom, the Freudian 'family romance' provides Axelrod with most of the context he needs for Plath. He writes:

> I additionally suggest that to separate the literary text from the psychosocial one is to ascribe to the institution of literature more originating power than it actually possesses, while preventing a juxtaposition that has the potential both to raise problems and to explain.[124]

However, in my view Axelrod, while proposing a 'juxtaposition,' is really asserting an identity along the lines of Bloom's conflation of the discourses of psychoanalysis and literary criticism which I examined in Chapter One. This study has attempted to contextualise by juxtaposition, while remaining sensitive to the 'dialectic of outside and inside' which the poetry itself reproduces. Moreover, it is precisely an 'originating power' that Bachelard's idea of poetic phenomenology proposes when he states of poetry's effects: 'the poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me.'[125] Axelrod's study represents another psychobiography rather than a 'biography of the imagination,' as can be seen from the many (and often unfair) assumptions he makes about Plath's family, particularly her mother:

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[122] Axelrod, Steven Gould, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
[123] Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words*, p. 26
[124] Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words,* p.83

> Showering her gifted daughter with praise for her success throughout her life, Aurelia Plath proved a receptive audience for her daughter's endless recountings of trials and victories, though hardly of defeats...That drama is in a sense Aurelia Plath's creation, describing the limits of her interest and imagination.[126]

Thus Plath is neatly absolved of all responsibility for her own psyche, and Axelrod simply acquiesces in the problematic, Freudian-inflected picture of her mother Plath gives us in poems like 'Medusa' and in her journals. Axelrod never subjects Plath's own version of these relationships to scrutiny—a dangerous approach, I would argue, when one is dealing with a writer as self-dramatising as Plath clearly was. Axelrod's book also occasionally speaks about the text as 'a potential space'[127] which Plath clears for herself by swerving from both her biological and literary precursors. However Axelrod does not elaborate on the spatial trope, merely invoking it as a metaphor for the poetic text. But as Bachelard indicates, and as I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, the spatial metaphors inherent in a text are laden with potential meaning, and a phenomenology of poetic space provides an alternative route through the twin impasses of New Critical ahistorical autonomy on one hand, and the all-encompassing (and equally ahistorical) Bloomian version of Oedipal transmission on the other.

Examples like those I have referred to above illustrate the common difficulties of Plath criticism; despite one's best efforts to avoid taking the most obvious route, the only genuine-seeming key to the textual labyrinth of her work seems inevitably to be labelled 'biography.' I have prefaced this section of my thesis with a description of these critical perspectives because I consider it inevitable that any study of 'identity' or 'self-fashioning' in Plath's poetry will come up against this biographical necessity. Moreover this fact is in itself extremely illuminating, since it is precisely the 'logic and unity'[128] of Plath's work which is at issue here. Not only the biographical problems but also the increasing tendency of scholars to supplement their interpretations of the work by referring to the original draft context of the *Ariel* poems (the only drafts systematically saved and dated by Plath) indicate that Plath's work gestures, in perhaps a unique way, beyond itself. Many of the poems seem to

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[125] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xvii
[126] Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words*, p. 91
[127] Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words,* see pp. 8, 18.

demand biographical interpretations, and it is surely the job of the critic to investigate the reasons for this. There is a sensed need for supplemental material, as though the poems' vehement shorthand needed to be 'fleshed out' more satisfactorily. That so much is in fact known about Plath's life only contributes to the problem—new avenues of speculation are disclosed, but nothing is resolved. Like both Dickinson and H.D., Plath's posthumous inability to determine the boundaries of her own literary legacy has licensed an extreme form of mythologising. It is a situation oddly foreseen by 'The Fearful', with its figure of the 'fierce mask' of a voracious, consuming fiction, as well as in other poems, most notably 'Words' in which—very significantly—an absolute division between 'words dry and riderless' and the 'fixed stars' which 'govern a life'[129] is posited.

In this study I have already examined the various types of mythography which surround each of these writers and their works. In the case of both Dickinson and Plath, it can be argued that physical absence from the literary-critical 'scene' contributed in large part to the nature of the immediate critical response to their work. It is clear that—where Plath is concerned—many critics are responding not to the poems but to the critical climate from which the work has become inseparable. In this group I would include Harold Bloom, with his astonishing editor's introduction to a collection of critical essays on Plath:

> The more fanciful of Plath's admirers have ventured to link her to Emily Dickinson, the most original consciousness and most formidable intellect among all poets in the language since William Blake. A far better comparison would be to Mrs. Felicia Hemans, English Romantic versifier, whose tragic early death gave her a certain glamour for a time. Mrs. Hemans is remembered today solely for her dramatic lyric, "Casabianca," with its abrupt opening line, "The boy stood on the burning deck," most memorably parodied by the wag who completed the couplet with: "eating peanuts by the peck." "Lady Lazarus" is the "Casabianca" of my generation and may endure, as such, in some future edition of that marvelous anthology *The Stuffed Owl*.[130]

Needless to say, Plath is also conspicuously absent from Bloom's 'Western Canon.' In this short essay, the uncanny resemblance between Bloom and that early critic of

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[128] Kendall, Sylvia Plath: *A Critical Study,* p. 110

[129] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 270

[130] Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath.*(New York: Chelsea House: 1989).

Dickinson, Andrew Lang, is surely too salient to be passed over. Indeed it is even conceivable that Bloom may turn out to be the Andrew Lang of Plath studies.

Two polarities in Plath's work which I highlighted at the beginning of this essay—a self which is merely or less than the sum of its parts versus an integrated self capable of transcendence—will provide key terms for my examination of her poetry. I have indicated some of the critical views this has given rise to, the more widely-held of which favours an interpretation of *Ariel* as the zenith of Plath's achievement, the acme of artistic emergence. Despite all assertions to the contrary, this view still takes its impetus from what is known of Plath's experiences during the final six months of her life, with its emphasis on overcoming adversity through the triumphant autonomy of art. Both feminist interpretations of Plath and those which have been influenced by Ted Hughes's theories of a mythology of self in her work[131] have relied on this idea, which has had several unfortunate effects. Firstly, it has tended to obscure the work Plath did before 1962, as if this should be viewed merely as a prolegomenon to the final decisive denouement of the *Ariel* poems. A careful reading shows that many of the themes and tropes of *Ariel* are prefigured in *The Colossus* (and even earlier)—Plath was in fact a remarkably consistent writer. Secondly, this approach has been inclined to focus attention only on those poems in which Plath emphasises self-recovery; poems like "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" and the 'Bee' poems. Such an emphasis has contributed to the image of Plath as a sensationalist, a writer with a straightforward feminist message and a limited range of perspectives. This is of course to oversimplify the profoundly equivocal message of *Ariel*, to simultaneously denigrate most of the poetry's identifiable content and to gloss over its most ineluctably tragic (and most important aesthetic) implications. And thirdly, this interpretation has led to the delineation of an unhelpful but powerful teleology, which in its very crudest form tends to view the entirety of Plath's oeuvre as a kind of extended suicide note. In this essay I will extend my examination of structural metaphor and emergent consciousness into a consideration of Plath's poetry in order to show that her work represents, not a culmination, but rather something wholly different. In order to do this I will approach Plath first through the

[131] See in particular Judith Kroll's *Sylvia Plath: Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), also Tim Kendall's more recent study, Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)

critical writings of Ted Hughes, arguably her most influential interpreter and the reader who has supplied an entire critical vocabulary for her work, much of which is founded, very significantly, upon metaphors of space.

Ted Hughes's editing of Plath's work—in particular his editorial interventions during the preparation of *Ariel* for its posthumous publication—has excited some critical controversy. A number of prominent critics, most notably Marjorie Perloff, have taken Hughes to task for his alteration of Plath's intended order for the poems in the book, as well as for his more silent textual interventions (accidental mistranscription and omission of exclamation marks, for example).[132] However, Hughes's introductory essays have undeniably provided a unique insight into her working methods and the conditions in which the poems were produced. Of particular interest is his introduction to the American edition of her *Journals*, in which he forcefully emphasises that the purpose of the publication is to provide information about Plath's development as an artist.[133] Offering the publication as a supplement to the text of *Ariel*, Hughes provides a complete chronology of Plath's

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[132] These concerns are of a piece with a recent increase of critical interest in Plath's manuscripts, a tendency which recalls the work of critics such as Sharon Cameron on Dickinson's manuscripts. Tracy Brain, in *The Other Sylvia Plath*, remarks of Plath's unpublished work and typescripts: 'The *Ariel* typescript reflects Plath's continued aversion to finality...once seen, it is impossible to discount these unpublished materials, or to regard them as anything less than an integral part of what is actually published. One analogy might be to regard the published poems as the tip of the iceberg visible above the water, and the unpublished drafts as the invisible part below...These discarded or alternate versions of lines allow us a more complete picture of Plath's intentions as a writer, and help us to understand her work more fully.' *The Other Sylvia Plath*, p. 30 Brain's analysis serves to emphasise the difficulties involved in construing 'intention' from the posthumous publication of work, as I have already acknowledged in my examination of Dickinson.

[133] In fact, as Jacqueline Rose and others have pointed out, the *Journals* may well have been published as a corrective to the picture of Plath given by the 1979 publication *Letters Home*, edited by her mother Aurelia Plath. Hughes himself hints as much in the introductory essay to the volume: 'The motive in publishing these journals will be questioned. The argument against it is still strong. A decisive factor has been certain evident confusions, provoked in the minds of many of her readers by her later poetry. *Ariel* is dramatic speech of a kind. But to what persona and to what drama is it to be fitted? The poems don't seem to supply enough evidence of the definitive sort. This might have been no bad thing, if a riddle fertile in hypotheses is a good one. But the circumstances of her death, it seems, multiplied every one of her statements by a wild, unknown quantity. The results, among her interpreters, have hardly been steadied by the account she gave of herself in her letters to her mother, or by the errant versions supplied by her biographers. So the question grows: how do we find our way through this accompaniment, which has now become almost a part of the opus? Would we be helped if we had more first-hand testimony, a more intimately assured image, of what she was really like? In answer to this, these papers, which contain the nearest thing to a living portrait of her, are offered in the hope of providing some ballast for our idea of the reality behind the poems. Maybe they will do more.' Ted Hughes: 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals,' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber 1995), p. 177. Note here Hughes's emphasis on the necessity of supplementing the text because of a perceived dearth of

poetic development, the culmination of which is represented by the 'breakthrough' months of her 1962 autumn in Devon. Hughes diagnoses Plath as a unique case in the history of poetry: 'the difficulty is the extreme peculiarity in kind of her poetic gift. And the difficulty is not lessened by the fact that she left behind two completely different kinds of poetry.'[134] The first kind of poetry, in Hughes's analysis, was everything before the true '*Ariel* voice' emerged in 'Elm', which was written on 19 April 1962. The fact that he describes the two kinds of poetry as 'completely different' contributes to the drama of the unfolding narrative in this essay; although the *Journals* notoriously break off in 1959[135], with Plath's return to England from the U.S., they are nevertheless offered, in this volume, as part of the preparation for *Ariel*'s apotheosis. The fact that no first-hand extra-textual record (beyond a few censored letters) survives from this period means that Hughes's account has a claim to being the only authoritative one. The absence of relevant autobiographical writing serves only to increase the effect of 'weird autonomy'[136] he perceives in *Ariel*. Hughes links his discussion of *Ariel*'s emergence with his own theories of poetic gestation:

> Few poets have disclosed in any way the birth circumstances of their poetic gift, or the necessary purpose these serve in their psychic economy. It is not easy to name one. As if the first concern of poetry were to cover its tracks. When a deliberate attempt to reveal all has been made, by a Pasternak or a Wordsworth, the result is discursive autobiography—illuminating enough but not an X-ray. Otherwise poets are very properly bent on exploring subject matter, themes, intellectual possibilities and modifications, evolving the foliage and blossoms and fruit of a natural cultural organism whose roots are hidden, and whose birth and private purpose are no part of the crop.[137]

This is, of course, a highly partial view of poetic development. For one thing, the kind of self-analysis found in Plath's journals and poems is heavily indebted to

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information in the poems themselves. This can hardly be ignored, despite his emphasis on the role played by her death in increasing the 'riddle' of the poems.

[134] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 178

[135] There were two volumes documenting the period from late 1959 until 1963. Hughes claims to have destroyed one and lost the other: 'two other notebooks survived for a while after her death. They continued from where the surviving record breaks off in late 1959 and covered the last three years of her life. The second of these two books her husband destroyed, because he did not want her children to have to read it (in those days he regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The earlier one disappeared more recently and may, presumably, still turn up.' Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 177. Note Hughes's pointed rejection of the first person pronoun throughout this account.

[136] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 180

Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis—hardly a resource that would have enabled Wordsworth to describe the inner necessities determining his artistic development. However Keats, with his theories about the 'chamber of soul-making' and 'negative capability' went far enough in describing *his*, and in the post-Freudian era, Jean Genet, Marina Tsvetaeva (Pasternak's friend and contemporary) and H.D. (among others) have given creditable reflections of the origins and purpose of writing in their own psyches, whether those reflections are strictly 'autobiographical' or not.[138] Hughes's comments give the impression that Plath's poetry was invariably self-referential (in subject-matter also), gesturing continually towards the circumstances of its own production. To regard Plath as *quite* such a unique writer, I would argue, is to begin to pathologise her. Taking his cue, in all probability, from *The Bell Jar* and other metaphors of structure in Plath's poetry, Hughes then describes the process as he discerns it in her work:

> Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of that birth and purpose. Though her whole considerable ambition was fixed on becoming the normal flowering and fruiting kind of writer, her work was roots only. Almost as if her entire oeuvre were enclosed within those processes and transformations that happen in other poets before they can even begin, before the muse can hold out a leaf. Or as if all poetry were made up of the feats and shows performed by the poetic spirit Ariel. Whereas her poetry is the biology of Ariel, the ontology of Ariel—the story of Ariel's imprisonment in the pine, before Prospero opened it.[139]

Significantly, Hughes always describes Plath's development as an enclosed process: 'a continuous hermetically-sealed process that looked like deadlock…it remained largely outside her ordinary consciousness, but in her poems we see the inner working of it.'[140] His description is of a process Plath is said to have recognised as an inner 'drama', and fitted inside the mythological framework of an initial death (her 1953 suicide attempt), a period of gestation, and an eventual triumphant re-birth (represented in the achievement of *Ariel*). There is undoubtedly much evidence to support this view in such poems as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", and Hughes admits

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[137] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 178

[138] See Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* (tr. Bernard Frechtman, London: Faber and Faber, 1990) Tsvetaeva's 'Art in the Light of Conscience' (*Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva,* tr. Angela Livingstone, London: 1992) and H.D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision.*

[139] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 178

that as an interpretation it can be seen as 'a routine reconstruction from a psychoanalytical point of view. But she made much of it...'[141] However Hughes's own interpretation goes very far in its mixture of fatalism and biological essentialism:

> One would like to emphasize even more strongly the weird autonomy of what was going on in there. It gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process—and just as much beyond her manipulative interference. And like a pregnancy, selfish with her resources. We can hardly make too much of this special condition...[142]

The image of the woman artist which emerges from this portrait is that of a Sybil in the grip of powerful, biologically-determined process that it is beyond her power to actively control. Plath's poetic development is seen as something that happened autonomously over time, not something she willed and worked on. Unsurprisingly, in his introductory essay to the first edition of *Ariel*, Hughes linked a number of significant stages in the development of this inner daemon to her pregnancies and the birth of her two children: 'the birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight. Her second child brought things a giant step forward.'[143] There is a peculiar division at the heart of Hughes's analysis of Plath's development. Nowhere does he characterise what she was attempting in terms of a specifically *literary* ambition, instead the poems are seen as stages in an act of self-renewal, with the emphasis on *self*. He uses Jungian theories to support this view:

> A Jungian might call the whole phase a classic case of the alchemical individuation of the self. This interpretation would not tie up every loose end, but it would make positive meaning of the details of the poetic imagery—those silent horrors going on inside a glass crucible, a crucible that reappears in many forms, but always glassy and always closed. Above all, perhaps, it would help to confirm a truth—that the process was, in fact, a natural and positive process, if not the most positive and healing of all involuntary responses to the damage of life: a process of self-salvation—a resurrection of her deepest spiritual vitality against the odds of her fate. And the Jungian interpretation would fit the extraordinary outcome too: the birth of her new creative self.[144]

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[140] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 179
[141] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 180
[142] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* pp. 180-181
[143] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 162
[144] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 182

There are several things going on in this passage. Firstly, the Jungian example is not cited as a possible influence, but introduced as a useful coincidence. Secondly, 'poetic images' are evoked only as symptoms of the inner process, never as first cause; nor are they portrayed as having an independent existence as artefacts in their own right. Thirdly, the bell-jar imagery reappears here as a sign of horrific unknowability, but also as a kind of *transparency*, which is presumably why Hughes can see through it. Fourthly, the 'horrors' of Plath's vision are to be recouped into a positive outcome; hence they cannot be seen to represent the *intensification* of an inner crisis, but rather the healing exposure of that inner wound to the air. Hughes's portrayal of this development as a sealed process means that he can discount other occurrences in Plath's life as possible sources of influence on her later work, glossing over events thus: 'According to the appointed coincidence of such things, after July her outer circumstances intensified her inner battle to the limits. In October, when she and her husband began to live apart, every detail of the antagonist seemed to come into focus, and she started writing at top speed...'[145] The emphasis on coincidence on the one hand, and the savage autonomy of Plath's gift on the other, means that any notion of artistic or personal responsibility (on the part of either Plath or Hughes) can be discounted as irrelevant. Hughes reduces Plath's work to a single dominating and inescapable obsession. However, the essay's surprising culmination occurs when Hughes writes:

> All her poems are in a sense by-products. Her real creation was that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self, to which her Journal bears witness, and which proved itself so overwhelmingly in the *Ariel* poems of 1962. If this is the most important task a human being can undertake (and it must surely be one of the most difficult), then this is the importance of her poems, that they provide such an intimate, accurate embodiment of the whole process from beginning to end—or almost to the end.[146]

The description of such an accomplished body of work as a 'by-product' is negatively hyperbolic. To characterise the work as irrelevant in some obscure way, while intimating that the real work of art was a self now forever out of reach, deftly delegitimises the task of those who search Plath's work for clues to her state of mind

[145] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 188
[146] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 189

(and the reasons for her death), while suggesting that Hughes himself was the only first-hand witness to her 'real' achievement, the 'growth and new large strength in her personality.'[147] It is an act of extreme textual defensiveness, a refusal to entertain the undoubtedly problematic subject-matter and deepest implications of Plath's poetics. After all, it is not difficult to understand why Hughes's writing about Plath might be defensive, but what is more interesting is his portrayal of the glassy matrix of Plath's inspiration as simultaneously symbolic of death *and* birth. Although he admits that the sign of death is all-pervasive in these poems, he nevertheless seems compelled to assert that: 'death, in this matrix (and in one sense the whole complex, which had tried to kill her and had all but succeeded, came under the sign of death), had a homeopathic effect on the nucleus that survived.'[148] Like many feminist analyses of the *Ariel* poems (ironically), Hughes asserts that a 'self-overcoming self' *did* emerge from this matrix, even if the poems themselves—and here is where he parts company with most other similar analyses—bear, at best, shaky and tentative witness to this. Unlike the 'suicide note' theory of literary analysis, Hughes argues that Plath's work represents a birth, after which something went, presumably, drastically and 'coincidentally' wrong for the newly-fledged self.

The influence of this and other, similar, essays on Plath criticism has been considerable. In most cases, Plath's late poems have been seen as something entirely new, almost freakishly *sui generis*. However there have been a number of dissenting voices from this school of thought, chief among them Joyce Carol Oates in her 1973 *Southern Review* essay 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poems of Sylvia Plath' and more recently Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Oates's essay is valuable because it situates Plath at the end of a tradition, seeing her as representative of 'the deathliness of an old consciousness, the old corrupting hell of the Renaissance ideal and its "I"-ness separate and distinct from all other fields of consciousness..'[149] Oates views what she calls 'Romanticism and its gradually-accelerating hysteria' as the ultimate end of this consciousness, and regards Plath as 'one of the last Romantics.' This notion is also useful because it does not regard Plath as an exceptional case, and therefore as someone who cannot be subject to the

[147] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* pp. 188-189
[148] Hughes, *Winter Pollen,* p. 187

same critical approaches as other writers. However Oates extends her assertion of 'the passive, paralyzed, continually surfacing and fading consciousness of Sylvia Plath'[150] to unverifiable speculation about the poet's life, and attitudes to her children: 'even her own children where objects of her perception, there for the restless scrutiny of her image-making mind and not there as human beings...'[151] This is not a legitimate or helpful course—it should be observed that while it might be necessary to find a route from known life-facts to the poems, one cannot logically complete the circle from poetry back to biography. In my view Plath's artistry short-circuits all attempts to do this. Oates's denial of transcendence in Plath's work slips silently into a denial of artistic intentionality, when it should regard these concepts as separate.

Jacqueline Rose is also wary of identifying a transcendent, unified self in Plath's work. Commenting on the frequent use of sexual stereotype, as well as the existence of irreconcilable polarities in the poems, Rose writes:

> I think we should be very cautious about attempting to read Plath's writing in terms of a positive emergence of selfhood, of turning what may be better thought of in terms of the unbearable coexistence of opposites into a narrative progression from suffering into self-discovery or flight.[152]

Rose rightly portrays the sexual essentialism of the fantasies operating in Plath's work as deeply troubling for those who seek a feminist message in her work. Writing of the portrayals of Plath and Hughes which emerge from the journals, she comments, 'what they seem to be handing over to each other at a symbolic level are the most familiar, socially sanctioned, and dramatic stereotypes of masculinity and femininity as such.'[153]

I would argue that the profound ambivalence of response Plath's work has provoked in her critics can be regarded as symptomatic of what is already present in the work, as Rose puts it, the 'unbearable coexistence of opposites' around which her consciousness circles. I have shown how Dickinson, at the beginning of the

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[149] Joyce Carol Oates: 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poems of Sylvia Plath' , *Southern Review* IX, July 1973, p. 505
[150] Oates, Op. Cit., p. 509
[151] Oates, Op. Cit., p. 505
[152] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, pp. 86-87
[153] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* p. 128

micro-tradition I have been tracing, finds exhilaration in ambiguity, holding her poetry open to it. Her spaces are almost infinite. H.D., in response to painful personal and historical events, creates spaces of retreat and nurturance, while still dwelling in possibility. Both poets can be described as demonstrating a utopian movement of consciousness in poetry which is willing to envisage what Shelley termed 'the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.'[154] It is my contention that Sylvia Plath represents a terminal point for this kind of consciousness, in which the prospects of infinity which dazzled Emily Dickinson and H.D. are present only in images of fragmented wholeness, representing in turn the fragmentation of the literary consciousness which constitutes them. In my view this accounts for the pervasive late-modernist nostalgia which flavours so much of Plath's work, a nostalgia which (as I have argued) is not to be found in Dickinson's poetry, and which H.D. had successfully worked through by the time she came to write *Helen in Egypt*. The consciousness which emerges from Plath's work is dominated by a sense of its own belatedness. Against Harold Bloom, who would argue that such a sense derives from a purely aesthetic recognition (that all the 'strongest' poems have already been written by one's precursors) I would argue that this has more to do with Plath's situation in her particular social and historical moment. She remains forever a child of U.S. post-war ideology, whose writings were produced in advance of the social and political revolutions of the 1960s and the emergence of a significant artistic/political counterculture on either side of the Atlantic. Although it is undeniable that the influence of both Dickinson and H.D. has, since 1963, been continually adapted and renewed by writers who find in them some answers to the exigencies of their own historical era, Sylvia Plath represents a terminus for what I identify as the specifically modernist implications of their writings. Both Dickinson and H.D. provide images of a sovereign consciousness shoring itself against the overwhelming, occulted, or fragmented reality in which it has come to self-awareness. Plath's best poetry represents a troubling *acquiescence* to such realities, and the consciousness which operates in the poems demonstrates not an emergence from or ordering of these realities, but a pained participation in them. Plath's poetry represents the death of the utopian consciousness adumbrated

[154] Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (fifth edition), ed,

by Dickinson and H.D., dramatising the clash between that consciousness and the historical moment in which it is cast adrift. Her spatial metaphors are strikingly similar to Dickinson's and H.D.'s but, as I shall show, they function very differently, constantly threatening either to smother or shatter a self which is too closely identified with them.

If we accept Dickinson's maxim 'Nature is a Haunted House but Art - a House that tries to be Haunted'[155] as exemplary for this study, then the pervasive spectral imagery of Plath's work shows how close a relation exists between her and her great modernist precursor. In Plath's more successful early poems, a precarious balance exists between the invocation of these revenants for the purpose of creation (they function primarily as muses in the poetry), and the necessary attempt to keep them at bay, lest they overwhelm the self who has called them up. This is the drama between wilfulness and passivity which was established quite early in Plath's work and which quickly became a dominant theme. (As I have already observed, most of Plath's motifs were established early on in her poetic career, and her preoccupations are notably consistent, even if the style in which they are played out undergoes various metamorphoses.) Two poems from 1957, 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad' and 'The Thin People' deal with the double aspect of this technique. In the former, the speaker laments her inability to influence the maddening self-sufficiency she observes in nature, the inability to achieve a Stevensian fictive transcendence from the 'honest earth'. The stilted rhetoric in which the poem is couched bears witness to the poet's separation from the reality she describes, the prison-house of language from which she looks out: 'The vaunting mind / Snubs impromptu spiels of wind / And wrestles to impose / Its own order on what is.'[156] This is the traditional Nature/Culture divide, according to which it is the job of the creative artist to 'impose' himself on an inferior or hostile reality, like Stevens' Canon Aspirin.[157] However Plath, like one paying lip-service to a dogma, participates in the rhetoric of order without believing in it. The poem contains a recognition that to think (and write) thus is to 'hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank / Spurns such fiction /

M.H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), p. 792

[155] Letter to T.W. Higginson (1876), in Dickinson, *Selected Letters*, p. 236

[156] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 65-66

[157] 'He imposes orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.' Stevens, *Collected Poems,* p. 403

As nymphs; cold vision / Will have no counterfeit / Palmed off on it.' Nature, or 'reality' is obdurate, self-involved, and entirely separate from the speaker. Her attempts to conjure up elemental spirits are met with mocking defeat, and the self which remains is terribly impoverished: 'this beggared brain / Hatches no fortune.' The speaker of 'The Thin People' is, on the contrary, rather *too* successful in her attempts to invoke spirits, although here it is not only nature which is haunted, but also the self-in-history:

> They are always with us, the thin people
> Meager of dimension as the gray people
>
> On a movie-screen. They
> Are unreal, we say:
>
> It was only in a movie, it was only
> In a war making evil headlines when we
>
> Were small that they famished and
> Grew so lean and would not round
>
> Out their stalky limbs again though peace
> Plumped the bellies of the mice...[158]

The 'thin people' are never named, although it is clear that she is thinking of the starved inmates of the Nazi concentration camps as they appeared on 1940s newsreels during the speaker's childhood. Although she argues that the passage of time should logically make them disappear, they seem paradoxically to grow in power by virtue of their tenacity in memory. Vampire-like, they return from the scene of their repression in 'the contracted country of the head' and begin to drain reality of its richness, as if in revenge:

> Now the thin people do not obliterate
>
> Themselves as the dawn
> Grayness blues, reddens, and the outline
>
> Of the world comes clear and fills with color.
> They persist in the sunlit room: the wallpaper
>
> Frieze of cabbage-roses and cornflowers pales

[158] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 64-65

Under their thin-lipped smiles,

Their withering kingship.
How they prop each other up!

We own no wildernesses rich and deep enough
For stronghold against their stiff

Battalions.[159]

The similarities between this poem and 'Daddy' (1962) are obvious, although here the speaker can make no show of defiance against the vampirism of the thin people. The impoverishment experienced by the speaker in 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad' is here figured as a property of the spectral dead, like a principle of rapacity which threatens to encroach upon her and make her world 'go thin as a wasp's nest / And grayer...'[160] In addition, the similarities between the imagery of these lines and the haunted American wildernesses of Emily Dickinson and H.D. are very striking. 'We own no wildernesses rich and deep enough', says the speaker, as if America with its promise of unlimited prosperity were an inadequate reparation for the historical wrongs inflicted on these people. Whereas for Dickinson and H.D. the uncharted territory of the American imagination represents a space of enormous possibility, for Plath the vastness of the historical wrong outweighs the possibility of material or spiritual recompense. This poem contains an important early image of space (and self) defeated by history, as well as being the first of Plath's poems to deal implicitly with the material of the Nazi atrocities.

In two other 1957 poems, 'All the Dead Dears' and 'The Disquieting Muses', haunting is also the main theme, with the self represented as a haunted structure, dangerously porous and permeable. The first of these proclaims, 'How they grip us through thin and thick, / Those barnacle dead!'[161] figuring the haunters as female kin: 'From the mercury-backed glass / Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother / Reach hag-hands to haul me in...' It is by contemplation of her own image (her own femininity) that this anxiety of influence is intuited, as though femininity itself were

[159] The line-break 'wallpaper / Frieze of cabbage roses' is suggestive in this context. It appears to gesture ahead to such poems as 'Lady Lazarus' when Plath considers the barbaric and banal utilitarianism of the Nazis in manufacturing household items and furnishings from the body parts of their victims.
[160] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 65
[161] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 70-71

simultaneously vulnerability and threat, while the father-figure who would provide an alternative image is beyond reach, having sunk in tragi-comic fashion into the mirror from which the female spectres emerge: 'the fishpond surface / Where the daft father went down / With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair—' Self in this poem is portrayed as an image (a mirror) which is full of ghosts, or as a prisoner of heredity: 'we go, / Each skull-and-crossboned Gulliver / Riddled with ghosts, to lie / Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock.'[162] 'The Disquieting Muses', inspired by the eponymous De Chirico painting, is a more comprehensive treatment of the same theme, with the female haunters—explicitly described as 'muses'—appearing as a result of fairy-tale female malice:

> Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
> Or what disfigured and unsightly
> Cousin did you so unwisely keep
> Unasked to my christening, that she
> Sent these ladies in her stead
> With heads like darning-eggs to nod
> And nod and nod at foot and head
> And at the left side of my crib?[163]

Paradoxically, in this poem it is the mother's attempt to reassure and protect the daughter with benign godmothers, bedtime stories, and 'cookies and Ovaltine', which results in an intensification of the haunting. It is seemingly by means of the daughter's obstinate inadequacies that they 'get back':

> Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
> And praised my arabesques and trills
> Although each teacher found my touch
> Oddly wooden in spite of scales
> And the hours of practising, my ear
> Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
> I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
> From muses unhired by you, dear mother.[164]

The slightly desperate projection of a felt inadequacy in this poem prefigures the more breathlessly self-justifying rhetoric in many of the *Ariel* poems, most

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[162] 'Gulliver' again gestures forward to Plath's 1962 poem of that name, which Ann Stevenson suggests was written about Ted Hughes. See Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, p. 276
[163] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 74-76
[164] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 75

notoriously 'Medusa.' The pattern of repetition so common in those poems also appears here, with its half-mocking mimesis of nursery-rhyme and rocking cradle: 'I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere' and 'never were / Never, never found anywhere.'[165] In this poem it is the mother who is glassily enclosed in her denials of harsh reality, the hurricane which makes the study windows belly in 'like bubbles about to break' or 'floating above me in bluest air / On a green balloon bright with a million / Flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never found anywhere.' The mother is then blamed for the failure of such structures to resist being invaded:

> But the little planet bobbed away
> Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
> And I faced my travelling companions.
>
> Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
> They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
> Faces blank as the day I was born,
> Their shadows long in the setting sun
> That never brightens or goes down.
> And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
> Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
> Will betray the company I keep.[166]

It is in answer to the mother's imperative—an interpellation in an almost Althusserian sense and an image of unavoidable somatic/sexual destiny similar to that of 'All the Dead Dears'—that the daughter must continue to exist. Her whole life is imagined as a form of reproach. The image of belatedness in this stanza, that of the eternally setting sun, indicates that living thus is a task entirely without hope. But like Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, and the speaker of 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour'[167] the speaker resolves to 'save face,' while no alternative is entertained. This poem also demonstrates a turn away from the social or historical haunting of 'The Thin People' to the site of personal prehistory, a space which is figured as haunted or cursed ground, wholly inescapable.

Plath's early poetry is characterised by strict formal patterning, stilted rhetoric and an over-reliance on archaic diction. Her journals until 1959 reflect

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[165] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 75-76
[166] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 76

frustration at what she repeatedly calls her 'paralysis', her failure to break out of the narrowly artificial structures within which her inspiration seemed compelled to move. Although Hughes identifies the definitive turning-point in 'Elm', in reality (and quite naturally) there seem to be a number of significant stages in Plath's development, the most important of which occurs, arguably, in late 1959 or early 1960, with such poems as 'Blue Moles', 'The Colossus', the 'Poem For a Birthday' sequence, and 'Mushrooms.' Broadly speaking, before 1959 the speakers of Plath's poems who feel themselves menaced by ghostly encroachment invariably respond defensively, whether this involves taking on the carapace of a well-worn myth: 'O Oedipus. O Christ. You use me ill'[168]; or asserting themselves to be 'blameless' and 'innocent'[169], or engaging in elaborate avoidance-strategies, as in 'Full Fathom Five.' In the latter poem the speaker admits:

> You float near
> As keeled ice-mountains
>
> Of the north, to be steered clear
> Of, not fathomed. All obscurity
> Starts with a danger:
>
> Your dangers are many. I
> Cannot look much but your form suffers
> Some strange injury
>
> And seems to die: so vapors
> Ravel to clearness on the dawn sea.
> The muddy rumors
>
> Of your burial move me
> To half-believe: your reappearance
> Proves rumors shallow,
>
> For the archaic trenched lines
> Of your grained face shed time in runnels:
> Ages beat like rains
>
> On the unbeaten channels
> Of the ocean. Such sage humor and
> Durance are whirlpools

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[167] In this poem, avoiding the unpalatable prospect of self-loss in the sea, the dead fiddler crab described by the speaker is admired as having 'saved / Face, to face the bald-faced sun.' Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 97

[168] 'The Ravaged Face,' Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 115

[169] 'The Eye-Mote'; 'Electra on Azalea Path', Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 109, 116

To make away with the ground-
Work of the earth and the sky's ridgepole.[170]

The highly ambiguous rhetoric of this poem reflects the speaker's profound unease. The resurfacing father represents a significant threat to her wellbeing, and is to be avoided by means of the protective 'obscurity' of the sea mist or forgetfulness which serves to veil her from the seductive dangers of her father's sea 'kingdom'. As usual in Plath's work, death is highly eroticised.[171] The taboo which functions in this poem attempts to prevent her not only from dying, but also from committing incest: 'Your shelled bed I remember.' The half-belief experienced by the speaker refers to an ambivalently desired belief in her father's death, a belief which is then nullified by his reappearance. This calls forth admiration on the part of the speaker as well as a slow acquiescence; the earth and sky of a healthier world are dismissed in the course of the speaker's gradual seduction, and the poem closes on an explicitly suicidal note of consummation: 'Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water.'[172] In many ways this poem can be seen as Plath's rewriting of Dickinson's 'I started early — Took my Dog —', except that Plath's speaker appears not to possess the figurative resources of Dickinson's; her final acquiescence is to a kind of literalism, to a death which seems more real than the defensive obscurity in which she has hitherto lived. As I have shown, Dickinson's speaker skilfully preserves her appearance of innocence while simultaneously reversing the narrative of seduction and turning it against the reader; whereas in this poem Plath's speaker is unable to resist, by figurative means, the sea's temptations. The kind of acquiescence demonstrated by this poem in my view reflects on a metapoetic level the more relaxed diction which began to emerge in Plath's poetry after 1959. It is a paradoxical development: almost as though an increased passivity had resulted in a direct increase of poetic power. The result is a period of short-lived and rarely-commented upon ease with the idea of a possessed or 'inhabited' self, before the defensive strategies and restless questioning begin once more in the late spring of 1962.

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[170] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 92-93
[171] See also 'The Beekeepers' Daughter,' Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 118
[172] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 93

An idea of the self—and the Other—as a structure or vessel also becomes more pronounced in Plath's post-1959 work. One of the first examples of this occurs in her reworking of the Isis myth in 'The Colossus', where the speaker imagines herself as a tiny inhabitant of the shattered remains of a giant father-figure: 'I crawl like an ant in mourning / Over the weedy acres of your brow / To mend the immense skull-plates and clear / The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.'[173] Imitating Isis (a potent myth for Plath as well as for H.D.), the speaker of this poem attempts to collect and reinvigorate the scattered pieces of her dead father, although the task is again represented as self-defeating: 'Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser.' The task of reconstruction is figured both as an act of appeasement and of interpretation, but as a hermeneutic quest it is hopeless:

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
> Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
> Proceed from your great lips.
> It's worse than a barnyard.[174]

The noises made by the colossus refuse to signify, and they are both comic and vaguely obscene. There is a submerged reference here to Plath's well-documented difficulty with German, her father's mother-tongue. In 'Daddy,' she describes the language more defiantly as 'a barb wire snare' and an obscene 'engine'which encloses and victimises her, 'chuffing me off like a Jew.'[175] 'The Colossus' can be interpreted as an act of ventriloquism, in which the daughter reverses her position to become the inhabiting spirit or spectral presence of the inanimate structure; it can thus be seen as one of the poems in which the dominant opposition between spirit and structure so prevalent in *Ariel* first appears. Again, the daughter's position is one of extreme belatedness; part of her alienation consists in the fact that she is living in the aftermath of a cataclysm she can only speculate about: 'It would take more than a lightning-stroke / To create such a ruin.' In this, she anticipates the Elm's voice, which declares: 'I am incapable of more

[173] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp.129-130
[174] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 129
[175] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 223

knowledge.'[176] A consideration of this important feature of Plath's work—a painful consciousness of personal or cultural belatedness, and the concomitantly small sphere of action or knowledge this permits the perceiving consciousness—will allow us to see how reduced Dickinson's and H.D.'s phenomenological spaces have now become. All of the spaces Plath creates in her poetry are either inimical to the self which inhabits them, or are themselves menaced by rapacious outside forces. This is a feature which comes most urgently to the fore in the late-1962 poems, particularly those which deal with her children, as I argue below. 'The Colossus' has a great deal in common with another poem of this period, the seven-part 'Poem For a Birthday' which, as Hughes observes, was begun 'as a deliberate Roethke pastiche.'[177]

In this sequence the structure inhabited by the speaker's half-dormant consciousness is more identifiably maternal. The speaker imagines it consuming her: 'Mother of otherness / Eat me.'[178] In a chapter entitled 'Plath's Theology' Tim Kendall writes, 'references to mouths and eating recur with manic regularity through Plath's later work...the proliferation of mouths in Plath's poetry intricately relates to her explorations of religion and sacrifice. By the time of her latest group of poems, written in the fortnight before her death, the association can seem almost reflex.'[179] It is undoubtedly true that Plath associates the notion of eating and being eaten with the Christian sacrament, but I would suggest that the image also functions on a much more basic level. It is closely linked to the notion of identity in Plath's work, and is frequently used to signify the impossibility of achieving or maintaining an identity in the face of a constant threat of being devoured. This can be seen in such poems as 'Mary's Song', 'Lesbos', 'Getting There', 'The Jailer' and 'The Other', as well as the disturbing image in 'Edge' of the children who are re-consumed by their mother: 'Each dead child coiled, a white serpent, / One at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty. / She has folded / Them back into her body...'[180] If death appears in Plath's poetry as a fetishised image of completion and icy wholeness, then to be consumed after death (or as is almost invariably the case, while still alive) represents a kind of absolute horror, a total loss of self. It is most often the mother-figure who appears as

[176] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 193
[177] Hughes, Notes to 'Poem for a Birthday' in Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 289.
[178] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 132
[179] Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, pp. 117/119
[180] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 272

a devourer, sometimes the child (Plath often represents children and babies metonymically, as hungry mouths). In any case the idea of eating is intimately connected to maternity.[181] 'Poem For a Birthday' is a rehearsal of *The Bell Jar*'s subject-matter, a symbolic 'death' and period of rehabilitation in which the self is figured as almost entirely acquiescent and passive:

> This is the city where men are mended.
> I lie on a great anvil.
> The flat blue sky-circle
>
> Flew off like the hat of a doll
> When I fell out of the light. I entered
> The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.
>
> The mother of pestles diminished me.[182]

As in the novel, the breakdown is imagined as a regression to the maternal space. There is a pun here on 'indifference', which means both a deadening of emotion or dissociation and also *non*-difference, the failure of the self to differentiate itself from the mother. Non-differentiation nullifies all possibility of signification, which is why the cupboard is 'wordless.' However the recovered self is also figured as wholly passive and inert 'The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away'[183] in lines strongly reminiscent of the theatrical 'Lady Lazarus:' I rocked shut / As a seashell. / They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.'[184] 'Poem For a Birthday' provides a more hopeful image of structure at this point: 'The vase, reconstructed, houses / The elusive rose.'[185] It is an almost Yeatsian image for the fragile, reconstituted spirit which will recur, with striking consistency, in such poems as 'In Plaster' 'Morning Song' and 'Nick and the Candlestick.' In the second section of 'Poem For a Birthday', entitled 'Dark House', the speaker imagines herself as a kind of insect or mole (in an experimental return to

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[181] Axelrod links Plath's 'compulsive orality' to mothering in a more directly psychoanalytic way: 'these metaphors suggest that her need to voice poems was connected to disturbances in her earliest experience of parental nurturance. The style of that experience may have conditioned her enduring sense of hunger, suffocation, and deprivation as well as her need to keep proving oral prowess, envisioned not as the source of discrete products but as a continuous, life-sustaining process.' Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words*, p. 5

[182] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 136

[183] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 136

[184] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 245

the territory of 'Blue Moles') constructing an abode which is the closest she will come to H.D.'s gestatory space:

> This is a dark house, very big.
> I made it myself,
> Cell by cell from a quiet corner,
> Chewing at the gray paper,
> Oozing the glue drops,
> Whistling, wiggling my ears,
> Thinking of something else.
>
> It has so many cellars,
> Such eelish delvings!
> I am round as an owl,
> I see by my own light.
> Any day I may litter puppies
> Or mother a horse. My belly moves.
> I must make more maps.[186]

The impression of comfortable maternity this poems conveys is nevertheless threatened by invasion by 'otherness', as the speaker imagines herself gestating an alien species. This connects the poem with others in which Plath contemplates the difficulties of achieved identity, in the riddle poem 'Metaphors' for example, or in 'You're', where the speaker imagines the foetus she carries passing through various evolutionary stages before its emergence. Plath uses this idea in 'The Manor Garden' also: 'You move through the era of fishes, / The smug centuries of the pig— / Head, toe and finger / Come clear of the shadow'[187], and in 'Stillborn' where the dead foetuses (her poems) 'have a piggy and a fishy air.'[188] In this image the notion of invaded or haunted space is linked to ideas about the precariousness of identity; these speakers identify their own threatened identities with the ontological insecurity of the foetus. Hence the warning in section three of 'Poem For a Birthday': 'Mother, keep out of my barnyard, / I am becoming another.'[189] The pregnant self literally becomes *other* than itself, but this speaker is also attempting to ward off the mother that would consume *her*. Caught between the threat of invasion by otherness and the

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[185] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 137
[186] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 132
[187] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 125
[188] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 142
[189] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 133

threat of subsumption from her own mother, we can perceive that this speaker occupies an extremely narrow and liminal space indeed.

From the regressive fantasies of 'Poem For a Birthday', 'Blue Moles' and 'The Colossus' Plath moved in 1961 to a series of poems in which she explores these structures more consciously. In 'Morning Song', the fully differentiated and emerged child seems to have supplanted its mother completely:

> Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
> In a drafty museum, your nakedness
> Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.
>
> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.[190]

Here the walls which surround and attempt to protect the new-born are rendered 'blank' and passive by the unthinking, strong identity of the child. If innocence is equated only with ignorance in Plath's philosophy, then by a kind of corollary 'perfection' is associated with the absence of consciousness; hence the 'Munich Mannequins' are 'intolerable, without mind'[191], while the suffering bees in 'Wintering' are described as 'Black / mind against all that white.'[192] Especially in the work of her last years, Plath invariably equates sentience with pain; the pain of a consciousness trapped between unbearable confinement and equally dangerous exposure. The image in 'Morning Song' is one of reduction and reification; the mother becomes nothing other than a protective shelter for her child, with the inevitable 'effacement' of identity that entails. The voice of the mother from Plath's verse play 'Three Women' recognises her similarly increased exposure upon giving birth: 'How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?/...How long can I be a wall around my green property? /...It is a terrible thing / To be so open: it is as if my heart / Put on a face and walked into the world.'[193] However there are no easy escape routes according to Plath's *Weltanschauung*; if motherhood entails inimical exposure, then the 'Barren Woman' experiences a deathly hollowness:

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[190] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 157
[191] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p.263
[192] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 218
[193] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 185

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,
Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.
In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself,
Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies
Exhale their pallor like scent.[194]

Conversely, the pregnant 'Heavy Women' of the poem Plath finished only five days later, are 'Irrefutable, beautifully smug' as they 'step among the archetypes.'[195] In my view these poems represent another example of sexual stereotyping in Plath's work, a tendency which was to become more pronounced and hardened from 1961 in poems like 'Widow', 'The Fearful', 'Childless Woman' and 'Gigolo.' Both Pat MacPherson and Jacqueline Rose have astutely observed that the presence of such stereotypes makes Plath's characterisation as a feminist writer problematic at best. I have shown how both Dickinson and H.D. play with the notion of feminine stereotype (or less pejoratively, 'archetypes') in their work, effectively renovating and subverting the clichés of innocence and duplicity these figures usually entail. However, stereotype effectively functions as another form of enclosure in Plath's work, a space of imprisonment and fatalistic inevitability. The poetic consciousness which moves within stereotype can perhaps achieve a temporary revitalisation of the trope by means of the animation and vividness of its language, but it is still trapped inside a fundamentally belated interpretation of reality which is not of its own making. I see this as the half-realised truth Plath was later to articulate in 'Daddy', when she imagines having been imprisoned inside the 'black shoe' of patriarchal discourse, her 'poor and white' feet (very like the 'injured' metrical feet of H.D.'s Helen[196]) representing the damage inflicted on her voice by this—as she sees it—forced confinement. In these poems about pregnancy and maternity, the 'irrefutable' or inescapable qualities of a natural process (either pregnancy, gestation and birth, or helpless 'barrenness') are transposed into a poetics of absolute fatalism. The creative consciousness can only move, if at all, within the boundaries established by this inevitability.

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[194] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 157
[195] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 158
[196] See my reference to this in Chapter 3, p. 166

'In Plaster', which in sequence of composition followed 'Heavy Women' by almost a month, is a poem in which consciousness directly confronts the fact of its own enclosure. Hughes's notes to the poem inform us that it was written during a week Plath spent in hospital undergoing an appendectomy; a patient in full-body plaster cast occupied the bed next to her. The poem is a witty analysis of the classic split-self scenario which is so self-conscious that it seems to have walked straight out of an R.D. Laing case-study. Plath even introduces elements of the Hegelian master/slave parable: 'You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality', the 'ugly and hairy' occupant of the cast remarks about its 'amazingly white'[197] outer self. This poem returns us to the territory of *The Bell Jar* (which Plath was in fact writing at this time); the 'superior' cast is like the successful Esther, while its ill and ugly inhabitant represents her socially unacceptable self, shut away inside the asylum and confronting her unrecognisably hideous reflection in the mirror. The speaker even shares something of Esther's colloquial tone of voice:

> I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
> This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
> And the white person is certainly the superior one.
> She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
> At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality—
> She lay in bed with me like a dead body
> And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was
>
> Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.
> I couldn't sleep for a week, she was so cold.
> I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer.
> I couldn't understand her stupid behavior!
> When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist.
> Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:
> She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages.[198]

The other poem in Plath's oeuvre to which 'In Plaster' is closest is of course 'The Applicant' in which the (again highly stereotyped) view of marriage is of a suit, 'Black and stiff, but not a bad fit. / Will you marry it? / It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof / Against fire and bombs through the roof. / Believe me, they'll bury you in it.'[199] The marriage-like implications of the imprisoning suit pervade this poem also:

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[197] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 159
[198] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 158-159
[199] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 221

the plaster lies in bed with the speaker, makes 'no complaints', is frigidly cold but gradually begins to 'warm up', is given a 'soul' by her occupant, who 'patronize[s] her a little' and who is in turn waited on by the cast, noticing 'her tidiness and her calmness and her patience', all ideal wifely qualities. The poem portrays a marriage which has begun to go wrong because of a refusal of the white wife to remain satisfied with her limited role in life: 'I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself, / As if my habits offended her in some way. / She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.' The occupant of the plaster begins to etiolate like a light-deprived plant through wifely neglect, and begins to realise how dependence on the structure has resulted in greater weakness, even impotence: 'I wasn't in any position to get rid of her. / She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp—' The highly equivocal final stanza of the poem provides an image of defiance which is wholly unconvincing after the picture of mutual dependence the rest of the poem has given:

> I used to think we might make a go of it together—
> After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
> Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
> She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
> But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.
> I'm collecting my strength, one day I shall manage without her,
> And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.[200]

In this poem the imprisoning structure is figured as necessary but simultaneously deleterious to the self which inhabits it. It is the qualitative polarities of the speaker and its mute plaster habitation which create the mutual dependence (each needs the features of the other it lacks) *and* the antipathy. These conflicts were to return with increased savagery in October 1962 with 'The Jailer' in which the mask of gender identity has been dropped and the victimised speaker is engaged in open battle with a male oppressor who, 'impotent', nevertheless depends on her: 'what would he / Do, do, do without me?'[201] The significance of 'In Plaster' for this study lies in its emphasis on absolute polarity (Rose's 'unbearable opposites) which will return intensified, but not resolved, in the *Ariel* poems. The inhabiting consciousness hates the structure in which it is housed and which threatens to kill it like the (s)mothering womb in 'Medusa': 'secretly she began to hope I'd die. / Then

[200] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 160

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.' The pun on 'mummy-case' reminds us that it is the maternal aspect of the once-dependent and 'cold' plaster which is so threatening to the speaker whose gender remains unspecified throughout the poem. A careful reading of 'In Plaster' shows that any hope of a fully emerged, reintegrated self is a forlorn one, since this consciousness appears to have internalised division to such an extent that it is incapable of thinking in a non-oppositional way. Here the attempt at poetic self-constitution simply reproduces the murderous polarity instead of healing it.

The companion poem to 'In Plaster', 'Tulips' shows the speaker revelling in a relinquishment of the pain and effort of maintaining an identity, in a gesture of self-effacement which mimics death. Significantly, this state of non-being is equated with freedom: 'How free it is, you have no idea how free— / The peacefulness is so big it dazes you, / And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets. It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them / Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.'[202] This complex image combines elements of spatiality ('so big') with elements of consumption ('what the dead close on'). In this case neither state threatens the speaker, because she has already imaginatively relinquished her identity; in effect she has no self left to lose. 'Tulips' is Plath's most comprehensive rewriting of Dickinson, both in the evocation of the icy 'formal feeling' of the posthumous state and in the presence of a death-bed irritant. In Dickinson's case it is the buzzing fly, which synaesthetically obscures her vision, in Plath's it is the red tulips which fill the air up 'like a loud noise.' Their vitality is an unwilling reminder that her death is only an imagined one, making her recognise how unconvincing an identity she possesses: 'I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow'. Reluctantly, the speaker is brought back to the world of passive biological process, having willed herself to die, and having failed: 'I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.'[203]

To conclude I shall examine some relevant poems of the *Ariel* period, in order to show how the tensions and polarities I have identified in Plath's earlier work

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[201] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 227
[202] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 161
[203] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 162

return here in a heightened and more urgent form. 'Elm' is significant not only because it represents an enclosing structure, but also because of its motherly and pedagogical tone. It is as if the plaster cast of 'In Plaster' had suddenly taken on an admonitory voice of its own: 'I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root: / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there.'[204] Despite the second speaker's denials, the voice of the elm intervenes again and takes over, effectively subsuming the human speaker into a space of vocal non-differentiation similar to that in 'Poem For a Birthday.' This is figured as an act of murder, or a deathly seduction:

> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it
> Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.
>
> All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing.[205]

The superior mimesis of the Elm (as it imitates the noises of love's departure) has the power to make things true; this is an artistry which participates not in figurative liberation but in the literalism of death. It also recalls the galloping hooves of 'Words' 'traveling/ Off from the center' in a movement of absolute dissociation from their origin in the self who remains governed by 'fixed stars.'[206] Throughout this poem, the Elm's voice expresses a doubt about who is really dominant: 'The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me / Cruelly, being barren./ Her radiance scathes me. / Or perhaps I have caught her.' The passive 'drag' experienced by the Elm echoes the loveless imperative of the mother in 'The Disquieting Muses', as well as her menacing proximity. But the Elm also experiences her own kind of maternity by means of an invading otherness which inhabits her:

> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out

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[204] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 192
[205] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 192. There is perhaps a reference here to Ophelia's song from *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene V: 'He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone; / At his head a grass-green turf, / At his heels a stone.' Shakespeare, The Complete Works, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Harpercollins Ltd., 1992), p. 1059
[206] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 270

Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

As Plath wrote shortly afterwards in 'Event', 'love cannot come here.'[207] The owl 'loves' by preying while the reluctantly maternal Elm tries to interpret the passing clouds, 'Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables? / Is it for such I agitate my heart?' The note of complete alienation and fatalism in this poem represents one of the dominant poles occupied by the consciousness of *Ariel* which becomes more emphatic and inescapable in its implications towards the end of the compositional cycle, as I will indicate. The metonymy of the 'cry' which lives inside the Elm reflects an increasing emphasis on fragmentation (again, a tendency which contradicts any desire to see unity as a dominant trope in *Ariel*). Plath uses metonymy very strikingly in a series of poems about her children which confront and re-emphasise the ontological anxieties I have already observed in the poems of 1959-1960.

For example, 'Thalidomide' reads straightforwardly enough as a mother's horrified reaction to the effects of the notorious sedative drug which led to birth-defects in the babies of those women to whom it was prescribed. But it can also be read as an almost fascistic expression of Plath's fear of deviation and loss of identity. Her wholly unempathetic vision of 'dark / Amputations'[208] hints that she is re-entering the territory of 'Daddy' with his 'one gray toe' (her own father had had his gangrenous leg amputated shortly before he died). However what is most startling about this poem is its racial element. Plath appears to be equating malformation with miscegenation, associating blackness with imperfection:

O half moon—

Half-brain, luminosity—
Negro, masked like a white,

Your dark
Amputations crawl and appall—

[207] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 195
[208] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 252

Spidery, unsafe.[209]

This is a difficult poem to unpick. What are the 'dark / Amputations' of the masked Negro? Plath seems to be indicating that the absent limbs of the Thalidomide victim are like the amputated limbs of Negroes which refuse discreetly to disappear but like the 'African hands / Minute and shrunk for export' in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', or the metonymic bits of other victims of race-hate ('A cake of soap, a wedding ring, a gold filling' in 'Lady Lazarus'; the thinness of 'The Thin People'[210]) return from scenes of repression or confinement to threaten the speaker's identity. In this poem also, the self is a haunted structure. She asks: 'What glove / What leatheriness / Has protected / Me from that shadow— / The indelible buds, / Knuckles at shoulder-blades, the / Faces that / Shove into being, dragging / The lopped / Blood-caul of absences.'[211] Significantly enough, here the image of enclosure (the glove) would seem to have protected the *speaker* from the depredations of the drug, and not her children. This makes it clear that the poem is another rehearsal of the identity-anxiety so prevalent in Plath's work. The extreme attenuation of the poem, its impression of being barely there at all, echoes this on a formal level. When the child does enter the poem, it does so as a fragmented object, almost as though it had *not* escaped the drug's effects:

All night I carpenter

A space for the thing I am given,
A love

Of two wet eyes and a screech.
White spit

Of indifference!
The dark fruits revolve and fall.[212]

This poem returns to the night-time setting of 'Nick and the Candlestick' in which the belated speaker decorates her homicidal cave with 'The last of

[209] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 252
[210] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 246, 64
[211] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 252
[212] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 252

Victoriana.'[213] But 'Thalidomide' is an altogether more brutal poem, in which blind necessity rules. The impression of effort in 'carpenter', of passivity in 'I am given' and of existential alienation in 'indifference' are unmistakable. Plath achieves another pun on 'indifference' (in the sense of non-difference) here, throwing into doubt the effectiveness of the protective 'leatheriness' she has earlier claimed. 'Spit' contains a shocking three-fold pun. It envisages the child (and by association the self) as a kind of obscene ejaculation, its very existence an expression of contempt. It can also represent a roasting spit, bringing to mind the blood sacrifice of 'Mary's Song' (written in the same month), an interpretation supported by the revolving image of the twenty-third line. Thirdly it could signify a prominence, an indifference so large it is like a feature of the landscape. Given that the poem is dated 8 November 1962, barely a week after the U.S.-Soviet Cuban missile crisis had come to an end, it also reads like a young mother's contemplation of the terrors of nuclear fallout.[214] This theme recurred on 1 December in 'Brasilia' when Plath imagined the metallic 'super-people' who await atomic 'masses / Of cloud to give them expression.' Here her baby's identity is once more metonymically reduced: 'And my baby a nail / Driven, driven in. / He shrieks in his grease / Bones nosing for distances. / And I, nearly extinct, / His three teeth cutting / Themselves on my thumb...''[215] In 'Brasilia' Plath explicitly confronts post-war 'utopia' and turns from it in horror. Not only does this new order threaten her identity and that of her children, but 'Brasilia' makes clear, with its helpless reference to 'the star, / The old story', that it threatens the very intimate and human origins of figuration also. This is the source of the pathos of 'Nick and the Candlestick:'

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[213] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 241

[214] See 'Context' in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, pp. 92-93, where Plath writes: 'the issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America...Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse.' Tracy Brain has commented on Plath's environmental concerns in Chapter 3 of *The Other Sylvia Plath*, in which she argues that Plath is a much more politically aware poet than she is usually given credit for. In this chapter, she also comments on the frequent images of a porous self in Plath's work, suggesting that 'Plath's writing depicts the permeation and poisoning of the human body by toxic chemicals and pollutants; these material interpenetrations mirror the idea of cultural movement and permeability that are also important in Plath's work.' Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, p. 85

[215] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 258

O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,
Your crossed position.
The blood blooms clean

In you, ruby.
The pain
You wake to is not yours.

Love, love,
I have hung our cave with roses,
With soft rugs—

The last of Victoriana.
Let the stars
Plummet to their dark address,

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.[216]

Once again, figuration is portrayed as a belated act of reconstruction, a nostalgic and very momentary stay against confusion. The speaker's child represents a late, secularised, and anonymous repetition of the 'old story' of the Christ-child, the redemptive 'clean slate'[217] of a new generation. In these poems of motherhood, enclosures are protective but heavily menaced, they are at best provisional structures which temporarily obscure the 'gigantic gorilla interior'[218] of twentieth century history.

In contrast to H.D.'s images of transcendence in *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*, one of Plath's most beautiful poems presents transcendence in terms of absolute self-loss. 'The Night Dances' considers 'a revolving dance which her baby son performed at night in his crib.'[219] The smile which falls surrealistically into the grass at the beginning of this poem is 'irretrievable', and the speaker compares this to the dancing gestures of her baby which seem so significant to her that she finds it hard to

[216] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 242
[217] 'You're' from Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 141
[218] From 'Getting There' in Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 247
[219] Hughes, notes to Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 294

believe they are merely ephemeral: 'Surely they travel / The world forever, I shall not entirely / Sit emptied of beauties, the gift / Of your small breath, the drenched grass / Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.' The image of the lilies is then considered in *its* uniqueness—it is as if Plath is deconstructing the poem as she writes it—'their flesh bears no relation. Cold folds of the ego, the calla, / And the tiger, embellishing itself— / Spots, and a spread of hot petals.' This is the alienation of extreme self-involvement: a lily is not just a lily but is classified according to species; the calla lily (from the Greek *kallos*) is wrapped up in its own cold beauty—is there a pun here on 'callous'?—while the tiger-lily embellishes *itself* alone.[220] This re-introduces the theme of indifference, or as this poem expresses it, amnesia: 'The comets / Have such a space to cross, / Such coldness, forgetfulness.' She considers the movement of the comets to be a more appropriate simile for her son's gestures: 'so your gestures flake off— / Warm and human, then their pink light / Bleeding and peeling / Through the black amnesias of heaven.' By this time the speaker seems to have given up her belief that the self and its gestures can retain their identity, and the image is a disturbing one, a vision of dismemberment. In this it contrasts with 'The Fearful' in which the self is subsumed by the carapace or structure it tries to inhabit. These inimical opposites are the twin poles of Plath's vision of the inevitable logic of self-loss. Perfect guilelessness (as in the case of a child) leads to absolute victimisation, but a protective fiction is equally dangerous to the fragile self. In 'The Night Dances' the self is a disintegrating structure, its gestures inevitably swallowed up in inhospitable and unconscious space. The fatalistic tone of the poem is reflected in Plath's avoidance of the question mark, a technique she utilises here twice: 'And how will your night dances lose themselves.' And again at the end, when she compares her son's dances to falling snow: 'Why am I given / these lamps, these planets / Falling like blessings, like flakes / Six-sided, white / On my eyes, my lips, my hair / Touching and melting. / Nowhere.'[221] She had already used the technique to good effect at the end of 'The Bee Meeting', dramatising a consciousness belatedly trying to decipher an event which has already been 'accomplished.'[222] The

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[220] This links the lily image to other images of cold perfection in Plath's work, especially 'The Munich Mannequins' and the 'sweet, deep throats of the night flower' in the stiffened garden of 'Edge.' Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 262, 272

[221] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 250

[222] Plath,*Collected Poems*, p. 212

speaker of 'The Night Dances' similarly entertains no hope of an answer to her questions. This poem provides an image of self or consciousness not as emergent but as fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent.

A poem which combines elements of disintegration with those of structure in an anatomising of the creative consciousness is 'Apprehensions', which is dated 28 May 1962. The poem's title puns in three directions; firstly the act of the mind in trying to apprehend or understand its situation, to find 'what will suffice'; secondly the forward-gesturing quality of the word, in the sense of anxiety about the future, and lastly its meaning of capture and imprisonment. The speaker in this poem is consciousness itself, as it considers its inescapable condition. It is reminiscent of Plath's other riddle poems (particularly 'Metaphors' and 'The Couriers') and also of Dickinson's. Axelrod comments on the fondness for riddling shared by both poets. Regarding Dickinson as the more limited writer (largely, it seems, because she did not personally experience or treat of motherhood in her work) he draws an unnecessarily fine distinction between both poets' use of the technique when he writes: 'whereas Dickinson explores the capacity of language to represent and to disguise the world, Plath explores its capacity to reveal and conceal a self...for Plath the riddle of identity takes precedence over the riddle of the natural world.'[223] I have already demonstrated the extent to which Dickinson's techniques are in fact concerned with the delineation of consciousness and identity,[224] and I have also attempted to show the areas where Plath's concerns about consciousness intersect with (or are breached by) wider social and environmental anxieties. In 'Apprehensions' the four stanzas represent four separate constructions which are inhabited by various aspects of the self :

> There is this white wall, above which the sky creates itself—
> Infinite, green, utterly untouchable.
> Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also.
> They are my medium.

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[223] Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words*, p.144

[224] Puzzlingly, Axelrod seems to contradict himself on this point some pages later when he writes, 'yet whereas Plath above all feared the departure of the beloved other, Dickinson most dreaded the forfeit of consciousness. Unlike Plath, she actually seemed to prefer losing the other to achieving emotional relation, for the act of loving includes just the variety of loss that she found most intolerable—the loss of individual awareness and identity' Axelrod, *The Wound and the Cure of Words*, p. 148

The sun dissolves on this wall, bleeding its lights.[225]

I take this first stanza to be a representation of the realm of transcendence, the sealed-off and utterly 'other' realm of the religious or creative spirit. The speaker claims the angels and stars as 'her medium', meaning spiritual intermediaries in the sense of muses, but also perhaps the environment in which, as a thinking being or creative person, she should properly move. However the 'white wall' on which the sun dissolves effectively keeps her from such transcendence even as it allows her to perceive it. The second wall is less mysterious:

A gray wall now, clawed and bloody.
Is there no way out of the mind?
Steps at my back spiral into a well.
There are no trees or birds in this world,
There is only a sourness.[226]

The 'now' introduces the idea that these walls may not be distinct, but a single identical wall undergoing transformations. The wall of the mind is a site of injury and imprisonment. The spiralling steps are reminiscent of the spiral shell of '*Leuké*', however here the movement is not one of emergence but of descent into barrenness and 'sourness.' The descending movement continues into the third stanza:

This red wall winces continually:
A red fist, opening and closing,
Two gray, papery bags—
This is what I am made of, this and a terror
Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietàs.[227]

The descent has been from soul, to mind, and now to the terror of Yeats's 'dying animal'. The wincing red wall is that of the body, the red fist and papery bags its heart and lungs. The speaking consciousness has been reduced to its somatic functions and degraded by its terror of death. However the fourth stanza introduces an image of descent which is even more menacing because of its very incomprehensibility:

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[225] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 195
[226] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 195
[227] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 195

On a black wall, unidentifiable birds
Swivel their heads and cry.
There is no talk of immortality among these!
Cold blanks approach us:
They move in a hurry.[228]

This is the (perhaps posthumous) realm of total non-signification. The birds cry wordlessly and they can neither be recognised nor named by the speaker. In this scene of imprisonment language and figuration have broken down completely. This is the bottom of the 'terrible well'[229] of negation in which all pretensions to 'immortality' and transcendence have been relinquished. The poem ends on a note of terror and incomprehension with the nameless and shapeless 'cold blanks' which approach the speaker threatening, it seems, ever more complete annihilation. The poem bears striking similarities to Dickinson's poems about loss of consciousness, particularly 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain - ' where after a similar internal movement of descent the speaker 'finished knowing,' or 'I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -' which also ends on a note of non-comprehension. The crucial difference here is that Dickinson's poems are usually in the past tense, speaking of the experience as something already lived through. The speaker's voice testifies to her survival and also to her increase in knowledge, whereas Plath's poem is couched in the imprisoning panic of the present tense. At the very end her speaker looks ahead and sees approaching objects which she cannot identify—the impression given is of the anticipated breakdown and *non-recovery* of consciousness. This is not a playfully posthumous voice but a voice in the grip of mortal fear. As the final line of Plath's next poem 'Berck-Plage' expresses it: 'there is no hope, it is given up.'[230]

I think it is useful to regard *Ariel* not as a triumphant culmination, a teleological end-point, but as an intensified *reiteration*, since in my view the consciousness which animates these poems represents not an integrated identity, but rather its very impossibility. The consciousness of *Ariel* occupies many different masks and positions; part of the excitement of the volume comes from the restless dynamism of a voice which repeatedly insists on escaping from deadening enclosures.

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[228] Plath, *Collected Poems,* pp. 195-196
[229] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 242
[230] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 201

Such a movement always entails loss, however; the speaker of 'Ariel' imagines sloughing off 'dead hands, dead stringencies'[231]; the ascending consciousness of 'Fever 103' experiences orgiastic self-loss, 'my selves dissolving, old whore petticoats'[232]; and the symbolically liberated queen bee of 'Stings' is horribly injured, a metonymic 'red scar' already murdered by the 'wax house' which has engulfed her.[233] All of these poems emphasise the perils of attempting to escape imprisoning structures—what, after all, is the spirit without the body in which it lives, and what is consciousness without a logical structure in which to move? After consciousness has been liberated, where is it to go? In the words of the 'The Moon and the Yew Tree': 'I simply cannot see where there is to get to.'[234] Unlike Dickinson's, Plath's poems are not retrospective dispatches from an already achieved territory of consciousness, an 'intimate immensity', but desperate attempts at 'getting there.' On a formal level, this is expressed by repetition; like Coleridge's ancient mariner the consciousness of *Ariel* seems doomed to reiterate its imprisonment and gestures of liberation over and over, which is why the ostensibly definitive closure of 'Daddy' (and the earlier 'Bee' poems) needs to be maniacally repeated in 'The Jailer', 'Fever 103', 'Amnesiac', 'Ariel', 'Purdah', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Getting There', among others. If there is a recognition of sorts in *Ariel*, it is that consciousness can never escape what Plath elsewhere called 'the stigma of selfhood.' This realisation comes in one of a number of final poems which were not included in Plath's planned *Ariel* volume.[235] 'Totem', which is surely one of the most brilliant poems Plath ever wrote, is also the most disabused in its fatalistic recognition:

> There is no terminus, only suitcases
>
> Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
> Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes,
>
> Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.
> I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.

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[231] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 239
[232] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 232
[233] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 215
[234] Plath, *Collected Poems,* p. 173
[235] Hughes claims that the 1963 poems were different in kind from the poems of the previous six months, possessing a 'cooler inspiration.' He nevertheless gathered them into the altered manuscript he eventually published as *Ariel.* See Hughes, introduction to Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 13-17

> And in truth it is terrible,
> Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.
>
> They buzz like blue children
> In nets of the infinite,
>
> Roped in at the end by the one
> Death with its many sticks.[236]

This poem combines images of child-sacrifice and inevitability in a recognition that the only possible point of unity for the self, despite its varied masks and aspirations (its pathetic 'notions and tickets') is death. The vision of a self composed of 'short circuits and folding mirrors' indicates that transcendence is no longer possible. Moreover it is a vision of absolute relativity, in which the only variety is provided by a multiplicity of perspectives on death. The subtle interplay between seemingly unconnected images makes teleological sense only by means of the unifying image of the poem's final line. By a consideration of this poem and others in which the conscious self is placed between two undesirable and finally irreconcilable opposites one sees that the fatalism and teleology of Plath's work is not simply a creation of critics, but is clearly present in the poems. Bachelard's notion of the house (or other structures) as primarily *protective* of the self is a faith the speakers of Plath's poems seem to want to, but finally cannot share. The post World War II self, faced with what Plath called 'the terrors of mass extinction' and 'the incalculable genetic effects of fallout'[237] can no longer rely on traditional structures to protect it. Tracy Brain has commented on Plath's reactions to the nuclear bunker craze in Britain and America, while Stan Smith has also recognised the importance of Plath's historical awareness:

> It is precisely because her poetry is intensely private that it records so profoundly and distinctly the experience of living in history. In Plath's poetry, there is no gap between private and public. But it has been closed, not by some wilful choice on the part of the sensitive individual, but by a reality which is itself foreclosing upon the personal life. The acuity of Plath's vision lies in the penetration with which she sees this. It also constitutes its tragedy.[238]

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[236] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 264
[237] 'Context' in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, p. 92

Plath's speakers are menaced by the dangerous literalism of death. Although they have much in common with the figures of Dickinson's and H.D.'s poetry, they are incapable of believing in the figurative freedom or utopianism of structure which Bachelard identifies: 'housed everywhere but nowhere shut in, this is the motto of the dreamer of dwellings. In the last house as well as in the actual house, this day dream of inhabiting is thwarted. A daydream of elsewhere should be left open therefore, at all times.'[239] In a much more makeshift, panic-stricken, and provisional way, Plath's speaker declares: 'All night I carpenter / A space for the thing I am given.' The speedy, improvisatory movement of her later poems is a formal and structural illustration of this. They document the fatal alienation of a consciousness which realises that the medium in which it exists can no longer be relied upon. Plath can be seen as one of the last great modernists in the Stevensian sense—her poems are poems of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice—but their extreme attenuation and provisionality also mark a terminal point for the exploits of this late consciousness.

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[238] Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981) p. 202

[239] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 62

Conclusion

As I have stated in my Introduction, this thesis began with a narrow aim: the tracing of a single line of transmission from Dickinson through two of her most significant modernist descendants. Of necessity, the singleness of this intention became tempered by a recognition that the very virtue of 'influence' as a concept lies in its diffuseness, its generality, its lack of regard for the exclusivity of boundaries. Paul De Man uncovers the link between narrow notions of influence and 'intentionality' in his essay 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism' when he writes:

> If such a hypostasis, which changes the literary act into a literary object by the suppression of its intentional character, is not only possible but necessary in order to allow for a critical description, then we have not left the world in which the status of literary language is similar to that of a natural object. This assumption rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of intentionality. "Intent" is seen, by analogy with a physical model, as a transfer of a psychic or mental content that exists in the mind of a poet to the mind of a reader, somewhat as one would pour wine from a jar into a glass. A certain content has to be transferred elsewhere, and the energy necessary to effect the transfer has to come from an outside source called intention.[1]

De Man emphasises the structural nature of intention: 'the structural intentionality determines the relationship between the components of the resulting object in all its parts, but the relationship of the particular state of mind of the person engaged in the act of structurization to the structured object is altogether contingent.'[2] Harold Bloom in a sense adapts the mistaken understanding De Man is characterising above when he regards the power of a 'strong' poet as an inundation which may only be responded to defensively. Psychoanalysis is the tool he uses to justify the passivity of his poetic 'ephebe', and as I argue in Chapter Two, he thereby evades the 'intentional fallacy', swerving from his own New Critical influences in the process. In response to this observation, my aim in this thesis became to re-examine the idea of 'influence' away from the tyranny of psychoanalytic approaches, which unrealistically

[1] De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 25
[2] De Man, *Blindness and Insight,* p. 25

wrest the power of aesthetic self-determination (or 'intention') from later writers, concomitantly exaggerating the precursor's dominance.

My aim was also shaped more simply, by the recognition that the strong affinities between Dickinson, H.D. and Plath were due to factors other than the impossible purity of influence-anxiety, or the equal unlikelihood of pure coincidence. That such similarities were partly the outcome of a shared culture and gender seemed clear. My approach has therefore been to find a balanced model of reading appropriate to these writers, one which would neither lift them clear of their different historical situations, nor collapse their identities back into a notional 'context' (much as Greenblatt's New Historicist approach might regard the writer's consciousness as a fictional construct of its time). Therefore, with Bloom and Greenblatt functioning as the Scylla and Charybdis of my critical method, I have aimed to show how the poetry and prose of Dickinson, H.D. and Plath betrays a fundamental concern with consciousness (not the 'unconscious' of psychoanalysis, nor a narrow concept of 'identity') as instigated in and through the space of the text. This approach is not dissimilar to De Man's arguments about the intentional structure of the literary object, especially when he writes, in 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', 'moments of genuine humanity thus are moments at which all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting.'[3] And this, in turn, is an idea which has obvious affinities with Bachelard's statement in *The Poetics of Space:*

> as soon as art has become autonomous, it makes a fresh start.
> It is therefore salient to consider this start as a sort of phenomenology.
> On principle, phenomenology liquidates the past and confronts what is new.[4]

However, it is important to stress that Bachelard is not referring here to the 'autonomy' of the text in an ideal New Critical sense, cut adrift from all social or biographical considerations, but of the irreducibly transcendent quality of the successful poetic image. Indeed, in many ways Bachelard's reading successfully transcends the polarities of 'influence' and 'identity,' since his concept of poetic space functions

[3] De Man, *Blindness and Insight,* p. 147
[4] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxii

simultaneously as an *influence* on consciousness and as a *creation* of that consciousness. In addition, it is considerably less rigid than De Man's model of intentional structure. In viewing consciousness as irrepressible within the spatial images which comprise its arena, Bachelard even permits us to devise a model of reading which recognises potential continuities of consciousness across boundaries of gender, history and nationality. It is this sense of continuity which I have aimed to demonstrate in my reading of Dickinson, H.D., and Plath. I have characterised those continuities as a kind of micro-tradition within the more dominant modernist line, much as Georgina Taylor, in her recent study *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers, 1913-1946*, establishes H.D. within an international 'counter-public sphere' of women poets and critics.[5] In doing so I have attempted to remain alert to the constant 'dialectics of inside and outside' inherent in any reading project. Taylor's study, with its scrupulous historicisation of H.D. and her contemporaries, is perhaps symptomatic of a welcome shift in the study of women poets generally, in that it reflects a move away from the dominance of biographical interpretation towards a cooler assessment of the place of such writers within their historical and cultural contexts. Pat MacPherson's *Reflecting on The Bell Jar* is valuable for the same reason. Such studies avoid the kind of taxonomic reductions inherent in the historicising approach, but in my view Bachelard's maintenance of the idea of poetry's transcendent qualities, its 'sudden salience on the surface of the psyche' (an idea which I have stressed throughout, particularly in my analysis of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*), is a method which truly permits a correspondingly balanced and satisfying assessment of the writing's interior, structural or 'spatial' features without reducing them exclusively to their formal or biographical elements.

Furthermore, it has become clear during the writing of this thesis that the phenomenological model is a tool which can usefully be applied to a wide variety of writers and texts. While I have been attempting to satisfy my own curiosity about the many points of interrelationship between the three poets whose work I have examined

[5] Georgina Taylor, *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers, 1913-1946*, p. 6. Although I would counter the vaguely totalizing historical view of Taylor's study (heavily influenced by Habermas's notion of the eighteenth-century 'public sphere') its careful situating of H.D. within a group

here, I have recognised identical spatial obsessions in other writers, from John Donne ('And if no piece of chronicle we prove, / We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;'[6]), to the 'inscrutable house' of Elizabeth Bishop's 'Sestina,'[7] to Paul Muldoon's intricate 'nautilus of memory,' which is the tightly-knit formal structure of 'Yarrow.'[8] The final aim of this thesis, then, is to provide a practical critical approach which may permit the illumination of elements in a text which might otherwise go unremarked, and to show how such elements may be suggestive of vaster concerns. For as Bachelard writes, when he stresses the importance of space as the nursery of the wider human imagination:

> Great images have both history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the past adds special colour...great dreamers profess intimacy with the world. They learned this intimacy, however, meditating on the house.[9]

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of culturally active women writers, critics, editors and patrons during the pre World War One period and the inter-war years is enlightening.

[6] John Donne, 'The Canonization' in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Penguin Books, 1986), p.p. 47-48.

[7] Elizabeth Bishop, 'Sestina' in *Complete Poems*, (Chatto & Windus, 1991), p. 123.

[8] Paul Muldoon, 'Yarrow' in *Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber, 2001) p. 380

[9] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 33, 66.

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